

KITTY CARSTAIRS

— J. J. BELL —



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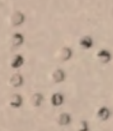
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KITTY CARSTAIRS

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By
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"Dancing Days," etc., etc.



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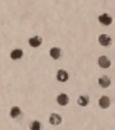
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KITTY CARSTAIRS

CHAPTER I

THROUGH the still summer dusk the night mail for London roared down the long declivity, clashed into a cutting and forth again, screamed, flashed past the deserted little station of Dunford, and thundered triumphantly along the level towards Kitty Carstairs.

Leaning on the fence bounding the track, the girl watched the tremendous approach with a fascination which custom had failed to dull. As the monster seemed to leap upon her, her attitude lost its easy laxness ; she stood erect, her white-clad arms leaving the fence, her slim brown fingers clutching it. A sensation of oily, steamy warmth, a glimpse of two dark human figures in a fiery glow—and the great engine was past. A whirl of brilliantly-lighted corridors with their puppet-like occupants, a couple of darkened sleeping-cars, more carriages, a postal van, a

guard's van—and the train was gone. A rush of air cooled her delicately-tanned face and disturbed her unprotected dark hair. Her brown eyes gazed after the train, and saw the big net swing out from the postal van, and snatch the little leather-covered bundle from the iron arm, which Sam the postman had moved into position a minute earlier.

With a sigh Kitty took her hands from the fence. The thrill was over, the reaction had come. For a moment she hesitated. Should she wait for Sam, the postman, as she sometimes did, and get his honest, cheerful company home? No, she couldn't be bothered with Sam to-night; she would sooner run the risk of meeting some one whom she would rather not meet.

She turned to cross the broad field that stretched between her and the main road, and found herself face to face with a young man in light tweeds, well cut but getting shabby. He was fairly tall, grey-eyed, and inclined to fairness, and his shaven countenance was decidedly attractive.

"Good evening," he said, with a grave smile, as though not quite sure of his welcome.

She was startled, but recovered herself as quickly as the flush left her cheek. "Good evening, Mr. Hayward," she returned in a tone of

politeness softened by kindness. "I didn't know you were in Dunford."

"I came home this afternoon. May I walk a bit of the way with you?—that is if you aren't ——" He stopped short.

Following his gaze she saw the figure of a man crossing the field in their direction. She frowned slightly, saying: "You know your people won't like it, Mr. Hayward." Then hurriedly—"I don't want to have to speak to Mr. Symington—if that's he coming."

"Then I'll stay with you, Kitty, for it's certainly Symington. Ah, he's turning back. One would almost think he had heard you."

"He couldn't possibly hear me at that distance, unless in his mind," she said. "And you had better not call me 'Kitty,' Mr. Hayward," she added. It was more an appeal than a command.

He made no reply, and they walked a little way in silence. He was first to speak.

"So you still go down to watch the London mail run through."

"Yes. I don't miss many evenings, but then, you know, it's the one sensation of this place—to me, at any rate."

"The first time I ever saw you was at the

fence there—five years ago, it must have been. Your hair was in a pigtail and——”

“I was sixteen then, and now I’m—about sixty.” She laughed rather drearily.

“And the last time I saw you, three months ago, you were there——”

“And no doubt if you come back in a hundred years, Mr. Hayward, you’ll find me there again!”

“I was glad to see you there to-night, Kitty—please don’t forbid me to be friendly. I’m feeling particularly friendless at present. Indeed, I think you might be kinder than call me ‘Mr. Hayward.’ What’s wrong with ‘Colin’?”

She ignored the question, but said kindly enough—“If you are in trouble, I’m sorry, and I hope it’s not serious.”

“I’ve failed in my final—for the second time.”

“Oh, Colin!” she exclaimed, sympathy putting an end to formality.

“Thanks, Kitty. That’s the most comforting thing I’ve heard since I came home.”

“Surely they weren’t hard on you.” Kitty’s social position was several steps down from that of Colin’s people, but behind her words lurked the suspicion, not based entirely on fancy, that the Haywards might have been very hard indeed on the youngest son and brother.

“ Oh, I daresay I deserved the dressing-down I got,” he returned. “ You see my parents, brothers, and sisters take my failure as a sort of public affront. My brothers have been brilliant, and because two of them became a minister and a lawyer without any apparent trouble, my father can’t see why I have not become a doctor with equal ease and speed.”

“ But you never wanted to be a doctor.”

“ That is not the point, Kitty. I was expected to become one. Well, I’ve struggled through four professionals, but Providence—I’ve no doubt about its being Providence—says I’ve gone far enough for humanity’s sake.”

“ Do you mean that you are not going to try again ? ” she asked after a moment.

“ Exactly ! And that has added to the trouble at home. I’m twenty-five, and I told them that I could not go on wasting more years at a thing I was plainly not adapted for. They insisted that I should go on, and I respectfully but firmly refused.” He paused.

“ Well, Colin ? ”—anxiously.

“ I don’t want you to imagine,” he said slowly, “ that I’m thinking any evil of my people. I understand their feelings, their pride, and so on, well enough ; but they don’t understand me one

little bit. Well, I'm going to look for something to do that doesn't require a university brain. To begin with, I'm going to London——"

"London! Oh!"

"Still hankering, Kitty?" he gently inquired.

"Never mind me. Please tell me more—if you want to."

"There isn't any more. If you are watching the train to-morrow night, you may see the last of me. I'll be on the look out, anyway."

They had come to the gate leading to the main road, and by tacit agreement they halted.

"But you haven't quarrelled with your people, Colin?"

He smiled queerly. "We don't quarrel in our family—more's the pity. We bottle it up, and of course that preserves the resentment. No, as far as I can see, we shall part politely, but I'm perfectly well aware that I needn't trouble to come home again until I can prove that my way was the right one." His tone changed suddenly. "But that's enough—too much—about my affairs. Tell me something about yourself, Kitty."

She shook her head. "I must go; it's almost ten, and——"

"Let me come as far as the end of the little wood."

She hesitated and gave in. It was for the last time. "We must walk quickly, then," she said.

But their steps lagged in the darkness of the pines.

"Do you still want to get away from Dunford?" he asked her. "Does the London train still call you?"

"Oh, don't speak about it! And please try to forget that I ever spoke about it. I'm a silly girl no longer."

"I never thought your ideas and ambitions silly, Kitty."

"You tried to discourage them," she said quickly.

"That was my selfishness. I didn't want you to go away from Dunford. It may not be a very lively place, but it's safe. Quite a number of people seem to find moderate happiness in the neighbourhood."

"The happiness of turnips!" she said fiercely, then laughed sadly. "Oh, that wasn't fair of me," she went on. "But, you know, before I came to live with my aunt and uncle here, I always looked forward to seeing the world and doing something in it, and my father encouraged me—but there's no use in going over that again."

Some day, perhaps, I'll resign myself to selling postage stamps, and sending telegrams and——"

"Are your uncle and aunt still set against your going elsewhere? Now that you're of age they could hardly prevent——"

"Please say no more, Colin. When you come back rich or famous, or both, you will find me here."

He could not check the words that rushed from his heart. "Kitty, if I could only hope that I might find you here—waiting."

She did not affect to misunderstand him.

"You don't really mean that," she said quietly. "We are too good friends for that sort of thing. Yes, I believe we are good friends, although our friendship has not all been open and straightforward. But I'm glad we've had it, Colin, and I don't want to be sorry afterwards."

"I never supposed you could love me," he said sadly, "but since you allow the friendship, will you let me write to you? You're the only friend I feel I want to write to while I'm trying to prove that my way is the right one."

She considered before she said, "I'd like to hear from you, but you must not write. It will only make trouble. And now I must say good-bye and—good luck." She put out her hand.

He held it, striving with himself. Then he said a little unsteadily, "I think you must know that I have cared for you all along, and because I may never see you again, will you—will you let me kiss you—once?"

"But, Colin, you understand that I—I don't love you?"

"Too well!"

She could just see that his face was white. She made an almost imperceptible movement, and it was not of refusal.

A moment later he was gone.

When the sound of his footsteps had ceased, Kitty stirred.

"Am I crying?" she said to herself, and wiped her eyes. "Poor Colin, poor boy! I wonder if he will write, after all." She started for home. "And I thought I had sort of got over the London longing," she sighed.

CHAPTER II

BY taking the path through the wood she had cut off a wide curve of the main road. She was nearly home. Already the few remaining lights of the village bade her welcome back to dulness.

“Five years!” she said to herself, “and I may live in it for fifty more.”

Kitty Carstairs scarcely remembered her mother. She had been brought—or allowed to bring herself up—by her father, a Glasgow journalist of brilliant parts and erratic methods, a wretched manager of his worldly affairs, a delightful guest, an entertaining host, and altogether a very lovable fellow. Kitty adored him, and ignored his weaknesses and eccentricities. When he died after a long illness, she wished she might follow him quickly. He left a little money, and just enough debts to eat it up, five MSS. of novels, two collections of travel sketches, and a play—all in a more or less unfinished state—and a letter

to Kitty's only relatives, the brother and sister of his dead wife.

Kitty never saw the contents of that letter ; all she knew was that it seemed to procure her a home with John Corrie and his sister in the village of Dunford.

For many years John Corrie had been post-master as well as proprietor of a flourishing general store, the only shop of importance in the place. A canny man and a far-sighted was John Corrie, grasping but not exactly mean. If the villagers did not love him, they respected his success. He had " got on " marvellously. Apart from the store he owned a mill, bought for an old song from the trustee of a bankrupt, and a coal yard taken over from an unlucky merchant and mortgagee. Also he had invested savings in land and houses. For some years, also, he had indulged in more speculative transactions. He was a tall, gaunt man with small, pale blue eyes, a long melancholy nose, a tight mouth, and high prominent cheek-bones over scanty grizzling whiskers, which ran into a short untidy beard. His head was quite bald. He was an abstainer, and a regular attender at public worship, though not an office-bearer of the church.

His sister Rachel assisted him capably in

the store. She may have been a good-looking maiden ; now she was a scraggy, drear-visaged creature with a curiously suspicious manner and a craze for doing everything precisely as her mother had done it. She seemed to object to youth discovering or making use of a new method. She was mean in some ways, but, perhaps for lack of courage, not so grasping as her brother. To him she was devoted.

Kitty attended to the post-office which served a district sparsely populated, but of considerable extent. She had never received a penny for this. On the other hand her relations did not grudge her in board, lodging and clothing ; and twice a year they gave her a pound to spend as she liked. She divided the money on "pretty things" and books. Books, by the way, had initiated the friendship between her and Colin Hayward. He had lent her many, but only one at a time, for the thing had to be done secretly ; but he, at least, preferred "one at a time," since it meant frequent meetings during his holidays.

As Kitty neared the cottage, which was ancient looking without but fairly modern within, and which was connected with the store and post-office, she was suddenly informed by her eyes

that the room on the right of the door was illuminated. Unless on a Sunday night, it was a rare thing to see a light in the parlour. The Corries received few visitors, with the exception of Alec Symington, the owner of White Farm, and a familiar guest like him was expected to feel at home in the kitchen.

The girl was uncertain what to do. She rejected the temptation to steal upstairs to bed; she was not going to let them think she was afraid of them at this time of day! Well, there was nothing for it but to go into the kitchen and wait. Noiselessly she entered and seated herself in a wicker chair.

A moment later the silence in the opposite room was broken, and by her aunt's voice raised to an unusual pitch.

"The more I think on it, John Corrie, the more I see what a fool ye've been. To take fifty pound for a thing that's come worth twenty thousand—that'll maybe yet be worth thirty, forty, ay fifty thousand——"

"Hold your tongue, woman!" Kitty scarcely recognized her uncle's voice. "How could I, or anybody, ha' foreseen that the shares would go up? Five year ago the broker in Glasgow told us they were rubbish. Six months ago ye

agreed I had done well to get fifty pound for them from Symington——”

“ Oh, he knew what he was doing—he knew, though you didn’t ! ”

“ I don’t believe he did. He’s been daft about gold mines for years. He’d ha’ been ruined by now if his father hadna died and left him White Farm. I tell ye, Rachel, he bought the five thousand shares off me with his eyes shut, just for a speculation. Don’t talk ! Ye know well ye were as sick-tired as I was o’ seeing the certificates lying in the safe, wi’ never a ha’penny o’ interest to——”

“ No, no, John, we’ve been cheated—I don’t care what ye say—and it’s maybe a judgment on us——”

“ That’s enough ! Ye mun make the best o’ a bad job. And it’ll maybe no be so bad in the end.” Corrie let out a laugh. “ Ye’ll no complain if we get half o’ whatever he gets for the shares, when he sells them.”

“ Oh, dinna begin on that again. He’ll never pay up.”

“ Ay, he’ll pay up. I’ve got his bond in my pocket ! ”

“ Ye didna tell me ! How did ye manage it ? ”

Corrie replied, but he had lowered his voice

and only a murmur reached Kitty's ears. She was not interested in her uncle's affairs generally, but it was something new to hear of his having been "done," for "done" was the word that came into her mind the moment she understood Symington's part in the business. Eavesdropping, however, was not one of her weaknesses, and she rose with the intention of making known her presence in the house.

Just then her aunt's voice rose in a sort of screech of incredulity—

"But she'll never consent!"

"We'll see about that. Leave it to me."

Once more the voices became indistinct. In the kitchen doorway Kitty stopped short. Whom were they talking about now? Herself? When had her consent ever been asked for anything? For a few moments she hesitated, tempted to lay her ear against the parlour door. Then throwing up her head, she stepped softly along the passage and shut the front door with a bang.

As she turned from it the parlour door was snatched open, and her uncle's face peered out. His brow was glistening and his eyes held gleams of excitement; but his voice was curiously mild.

"Come in here for a minute, Kitty," he said.

She followed him into the room, wondering.

This was not the customary reception on her return from seeing the London mail go by, and she was later to-night than ever she had been. Her aunt, sitting with folded hands on one side of the fern-filled hearth, gave her an instant's glance, which conveyed nothing, and resumed staring at the folded, toil-worn hands in her lap. Her uncle took his chair on the other side, saying—

“Sit down. Ye're late, but maybe ye've a good reason for that.” It may have been a smile that distorted, for a moment, his thin lips.

Kitty drew a chair from the table, seated herself and waited. She had learned long ago never to open a conversation with these two.

Mr. Corrie rubbed his hairy jaw between finger and thumb, cleared his throat, and said, almost pleasantly—“Well, did he meet ye?”

It was an unexpected question, and she could not answer immediately.

He helped her by adding, “Ye needna be shy. Mr. Symington left here half-an-hour back to look for ye.”

“No,” she answered, “he didn't meet me.” Strange that her uncle should speak of the man as “Mr.”

“Eh? No.” She repeated. “He didn't meet me.”

“That’s queer.” Uncle and aunt exchanged glances, and the latter asked. “Where were ye to-night?”

“At the railway.”

“And ye didn’t see Mr. Symington?”

“Yes. I saw him—at a distance.”

There was a pause before Mr. Corrie spoke with less smoothness than previously.

“Did ye keep away from him?”

“Not more than usual.”

“I want a plain answer.”

“No.”

“Then—who was wi’ ye at the time?”

Kitty flushed and went pale. “Mr. Colin Hayward.”

“What? That useless waster! Were ye not forbidden to ha’ any acquaintance——”

“And he’s failed again in his examinations!” cried Miss Corrie. “It’s the talk o’ the place.”

“What ha’ ye to say for yourself?” roared her brother.

“Nothing,” came the quiet answer; “nothing that would satisfy you or Aunt Rachel. I had no intention of meeting Mr. Hayward to-night, but when I did meet him I was not going to pretend I did not know him because he had failed in an examination. And before long I

was very glad I had met him, for his presence kept away Mr. Symington. Now, if you don't mind, I'll go to bed——”

A warning glance from his sister caused Mr. Corrie to strive for self-control.

“Sit still,” he said shortly. “Ye know perfectly well it's no the thing for you to be walking wi' one o' the Haywards. Mrs. Hayward, as ye're maybe not unaware, complained about it last year——”

“That'll do, John,” interposed Miss Corrie, observing the girl's burning cheeks. “We're as good as the Haywards any day, but we'd best forget that affair. Now that Kitty's heard about it, she'll know what to do in future.”

Kitty mastered the quiver of her pretty mouth, and with a quick movement brushed the tears from her dark eyes, and looked straight at her uncle.

“Please tell me at once,” she said, “what Mr. Symington wanted with me.”

The directness of the question had a disconcerting effect on Mr. Corrie.

“Maybe you could guess,” he mumbled at last. Kitty ignored the invitation.

“Ye'd best tell her, Rachel,” said Mr. Corrie.

“Mr. Symington is anxious to marry ye,” the woman said in little more than a whisper.

Without haste Kitty got up and moved to the door. Turning there, she faced them both. Her voice was clear and steady—

“I would not marry Mr. Symington for—for twenty thousand pounds.”

The man sprang to his feet, but she was gone, the door closed behind her.

“Almighty!” he gasped, sinking back into his chair.

“What’s wrong wi’ ye?” cried his sister. “I warned ye she would never consent.”

“She’ll consent yet!” he said, with a suppressed oath. “But—but what made her name twenty thousand pounds?”

* * * * *

It was nearly an hour later when Colin reached his father’s house. Hayward Senior was not precisely a heartless man, but he was totally without imagination.

Seated—one dares to say “posed”—at an extremely orderly writing-table in his fine old library—he received his youngest son with a stern look and motioned him to be seated. He was in evening dress, and you would never have taken him for anything but a gentleman—in the narrow sense of the word.

“You are late,” he said presently. “Where have you been?”

“Walking about. It’s a lovely night.”

Mr. Hayward smiled bitterly. “Were you alone?”

“Most of the time.” Colin looked at his father. “I met Miss Carstairs, and we talked for a little while.”

“Who on earth is Miss Carstairs?” Mr. Hayward did not wait for an answer to his ironic question. “You mean the young woman in the local post-office, I presume; the young woman, in fact, with whom your wretched philanderings——”

“That’s enough, father!” The young man rose quickly. “Let us leave Miss Carstairs out of——”

“Well, I trust you have informed her as to your income and prospects.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Usual thing in the circumstances — is it not?”

“I don’t understand you. What circumstances?”

“Tut!” exclaimed Mr. Hayward, “don’t you intend to marry the grocer’s daughter—I beg her pardon—niece?”

Colin barely restrained the fury that paled his face. "You may take my word for it," he said, "that Miss Carstairs certainly does not intend to marry me."

"Really! She must be a generous young person to give her kisses for nothing."

There was an ugly silence. The son took a step forward, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Since when," he asked at length, "have you been employing a private detective?"

A dull flush overran the older man's countenance. "Be careful! The information was not sought by me."

"Who gave it?"

"You are welcome to guess." He flicked a folded note across the table. It was addressed in pencil to "T. H. Hayward, Esq.," marked "Urgent," had evidently been torn from a notebook, and had been sealed with a scrap of stamp paper. "The servant found it under the hall door, about an hour ago. That's all I can tell you."

Colin opened it, and his face burned as he read—

"A friend advises you that your youngest son and the post-office girl were kissing in the wood to-night."

“ Well,” said Mr. Hayward, “ do you know the writing ? ”

His son made a gesture of negation. “ May I keep this ? ” he managed to say presently.

“ No,” said the other, holding out his hand for the paper. “ I will keep it—and God help the person who wrote it, when I find him or her ! ” Next moment he resumed his cold manner and incisive tone. “ All that, however, does not exonerate you, though I am not going to dwell on the unsavoury subject of your disgrace——”

“ There is no disgrace ! ” hotly cried Colin.

His father smiled wearily. “ Apparently we shall not agree on the meaning of the word. Now may I ask : what are you going to do ? ”

“ As I told you, I am going to London,” replied Colin, holding himself in.

“ And then ? ”

“ I don’t know yet.”

“ Very well.” Mr. Hayward opened a drawer and took out a small bundle of notes. He threw them on to the table, saying, “ A hundred pounds. Do as you like, but don’t ask for more—for your own sake.”

“ Father,” cried Colin, his anger lost in bitter humiliation. “ I swear I did my best at college, only I wasn’t fitted for——”

“We have already discussed that. By the way, I would suggest that you make it convenient to leave here early in the morning instead of to-morrow night, and so spare, in some measure, the feelings of your mother and sisters——”

“You are heartless! I will leave the house now!”

“Please no, unless you desire to start a scandal among the servants, and another in the village.”

“Oh, you are worse than heartless; you are unjust. . . . But I will wait till the morning. Good-bye.” Colin turned and moved towards the door.

“Stay! You have forgotten your money.”

Without looking back Colin went out.

When Mr. Hayward went to bed, half-an-hour later, he left—deliberately—the notes lying on his writing-table.

At 6.30 a.m. Colin entered a closed carriage, and with his modest baggage was driven to the station. There had been no farewells, and on the whole he did not regret their absence, for he knew they would have been highly seasoned with reproaches and unwelcome advice. He took a ticket for Glasgow.

Having heard the carriage drive away, Mr. Hayward in his dressing gown came down to

the library. Where the notes had been he found a scrap of paper—

I.O.U.

One hundred pounds.

C. H. HAYWARD.

He smiled sardonically, muttering, "I thought he would climb down," and put the I.O.U. beside the anonymous note of last night, in his safe.

CHAPTER III

THE morning mail for Dunford was usually in the post-office by a quarter to seven. It was conveyed from the train by Sam, the post-man, a little stout person with a grey military moustache, whose age, according to his own statement, was "forty-nine and a bit." It had been that for a good many years. With Sam's assistance Kitty was wont to sort the letters, and the two had become staunch friends, though no very serious confidences had been exchanged.

In the midst of the sorting this morning Sam suddenly remarked that Mr. Colin Hayward had not made a long stay with his people.

"I seen him at the station," he continued. "I couldna say where he was bound for, but he had a pickle luggage, and he wasna looking extra cheery. Been getting lectured for no passing his examination, I suppose. Poor lad, I'm vexed for him. He never got on with his folk, and he's

the only real gentleman in the family. They're a cauld-hearted stuck-up lot. Him an' me used often to gang fishing—that was afore your time, Miss—and a kinder, blither chap I never hope to meet. Well, well, if he's the black sheep, the others ha' used a queer lot o' whitewash."

Kitty felt that she was expected to say something, but just then Sam came on an address that required deciphering, and the subject dropped, not a little to her relief.

When the sorting was finished, Sam set out on his round, and she made her way to the cottage for breakfast. Her uncle was already at table looking more than usually morose; her aunt was muttering to something on the stove—a habit of hers when annoyed. Kitty perceived that she was still in disgrace, and her heart sank. After all, these two people constituted her whole kin, and she would have pleased them had it been possible, if only for the sake of peace and cheerfulness. More, she would have loved them had they given her the slightest encouragement.

Mr. Corrie took no notice of his niece as she approached her accustomed seat. To his sister he growled over his shoulder—

"The paper's late again! I've a good mind to start selling newspapers myself. That woman

seems to think she can play wi' her customers just because she's a widow."

"I'll speak to her," said Miss Corrie, coming over with a dish of bacon.

"Tell her she had best bring the paper here—or send it—within five minutes o' the train's arrival. D'ye hear?"

"Ay, I hear ye, John. Take yer breakfast now, and ha' patience for the paper."

The meal was almost over when Mr. Corrie spoke again—this time to his niece.

"Well, ha' ye thought over what I said to ye last night?" he abruptly demanded.

Kitty was not unprepared for the question, and she answered calmly enough that she had not further considered the matter—which was not, perhaps, quite accurate—because she had assumed that it was closed.

"Then ye'd better think it over now, for Mr. Symington's pretty sure to come again to-night."

"If he comes, I can only tell him what I told you—of course, I'll do it politely. . . . Uncle John, why are you so anxious for me to marry that man? Tell me straight—do you and Aunt Rachel want to get rid of me?"

Corrie hesitated. He dared not say, as he was tempted to say, that he could not afford to give

her a home any longer, because, for one thing, the girl was as well aware as himself that he kept the allowance made by the post-office for her services as assistant—an assistant, by the way, who did practically all the work.

“Not so long ago you thought very little of Mr. Symington,” she pursued, “and I’ve often heard Aunt Rachel call him anything but a nice man. Besides, he must be nearly forty.”

“That’s enough,” said Corrie sharply. “Your aunt and me know him better than we used to. We want you to marry him because we see ’twould be a good thing for you. Same time, he’s come into a heap of money.”

“Ay,” said Miss Corrie, “he has that! He’s talking o’ giving up the farm and setting up house in the city—Glasgow, maybe. That would suit ye fine, Kitty.”

“I’m sorry I can’t do what you want,” the girl said slowly. “I’d rather be dead than married to him. He——”

“Don’t talk trash!” exclaimed Corrie, lowering upon her. “Ye’ll give him ‘ay’ to-night or it’ll be the worse for ye. Don’t you try to cross me, ye daughter o’ a beggar!”

“John!” squealed his sister.

Kitty was on her feet, her beautiful eyes blaz-

ing from her white face. "How dare you?" she cried, shaking with furious indignation, "how dare you speak so of my father, a man with a great, noble mind?—you, you miserable thing, with not an idea in your head, not a thought in your heart, but money, money, money! My father owes you nothing—nothing, do you hear? His daughter has earned every penny she has cost you."

John Corrie, unused to contradiction, much less to retaliation, rose, grey of countenance, shaking with passion. Probably he was not aware that he had the bread knife in his hand, but his sister grabbed his wrist.

"Listen to me," he began in a thick voice.

"I won't! You are not sane," said Kitty, "or you would never have spoken such words about my father, your own sister's husband—not that I'll ever forgive them or you. But you are mad—mad with greed! I tell you, once and for all, I'm not for sale to Mr. Symington!"

He sat down with a crash, his mouth gaping.

"Go, go!" whispered Miss Corrie, motioning frantically with her free hand. "It's eight o'clock—time the office was open."

Kitty turned and went. She was glad to go, for her courage was already burned out.

Miss Corrie shook her brother. "Ye fool, ye forsaken fool!" she sputtered. "That temper o' yours has ruined everything. Ye'll never get her to marry him now."

He turned on her savagely. "What ha' ye told her?"

"Me? Never a word."

"Then what did she mean by saying she wasna for sale? . . . God! she must ha' heard——"

"Guessed maybe. Why did ye tell her the man had come into a heap o' money? I warned ye to go canny."

He flung her from him and got up. "Let her guess what she likes, think what she likes, do what she likes—but she's no going to beat me. I'll find a way! I'll manage her yet! Ten thousand—twenty—maybe twenty-five thousand pound—no, by heavens, I'm not to be done out o' that by a stubborn lass."

"Let be, John. Ye ha' siller enough. Ye dinna spend a trifle o' your income. Ye'll rue the day that ye cheated your sister's daughter, for that's what it comes to."

"Hold your silly tongue, woman. I've cheated nobody but myself."

She shook her head, saying, "I would like to read Hugh Carstairs' letter again."

“Ye’re welcome—another time. There’s the paper at last.” He almost ran to the front door.

He returned, opening the paper at the financial page. Seating himself, he cleared a space on the table and laid it thereon. Then his thick forefinger began to move down one of the columns as though it was feeling for something. At last it stopped, and he gazed awhile. . . . His breath went in with a hiss. “Zeniths!” he muttered.

His sister was staring over his shoulder, but her sight was indifferent. “What is it?” she gasped. “What about the Zeniths?”

In a hushed voice he replied, “They rose seven-and-sixpence yesterday. They’re now worth ninety shillings a share. That means £22,500 for the five thousand. . . . That would be £11,250 for me—us. . . . I wonder if Symington shouldna sell now. Wait till I see if it says anything about them here.” He turned to some paragraphs, headed “Mining Notes.” . . . “Ay, here it is! Oh, listen, Rachel! It says they’ll likely go to eight pound! Almighty! We munna let him sell!”

She sighed and said, “It’s time the shop was open.”

“Ay, so it is—but wait a minute.”

With another headshake she began to clear the table.

He rose suddenly. "There's the keys," he said, throwing them on to the table. "Ye can open the shop. I'm going up to White Farm."

CHAPTER IV

AT the risk of offending a stray customer Kitty delayed opening the post-office until her outraged spirit had become a little calmer—only a little, for the mingled passions so brutally aroused would subside only through sheer exhaustion. She had no one to confide in, no one to count on for sympathy and comfort. She had thought she had grown used to being alone in the world, but she had never experienced loneliness like this. Her bosom heaved, but her eyes remained dry.

The sounds of her aunt opening the shop next door roused her from a sort of stupor. Taking the big key, she proceeded to open the office for the 'day's business. There was some book-keeping to be done, also a schedule or two to fill up, but her hand shook so that she could scarcely write. And suddenly she realized that she was afraid, desperately afraid. She was so wholly

dependent on that man next door ; her very existence was in his hands ; she was, to all intents and purposes, his prisoner.

A few pounds would have made all the difference now. She possessed less than two shillings. There was no escape.

She unlocked the safe, and transferred part of its contents, money, stamps, and so forth, to their proper drawers. The money gave her a sickish feeling ; so much of it—the price of her salvation over and over again—her freedom in a fraction of it. . . . Violently she shut the drawer and turned to the desk.

A child came in with a letter and a penny, and, a little later, a woman with a parcel. Then there was a longish blank till an elderly man entered. He made a brief remark on the weather and proceeded to fill up a money order request-form. Presently he pushed it across the counter along with the money, £27, in three five-pound and twelve one-pound notes, also an eightpence to pay the charge. Laying the money on the desk, she collected her wits and carefully wrote out the order. Her sleeve brushed the notes separate without her noticing.

The man wanted to know when a letter would be delivered in a certain outlying place in Ireland,

and she took the "Post-office guide" to the counter and found him the information contained therein. He went out, leaving the door open. The brisk current of morning air was welcome. Before she could turn from the counter a girl came in with a few shillings for her savings account. . . .

When the girl had gone Kitty put her hands to her head, which was now throbbing painfully. Some little time elapsed before she returned to the desk. Observing the notes, she gathered them up and placed them in the proper drawer for money order and postal order transactions. She locked the drawer with a key on the bunch hanging from her belt. Often this drawer contained fairly large sums. Once more she attacked her clerical work.

Somehow the morning passed. At noon she was relieved for half an hour, by her uncle. He peered about, but made no remark, and without even glancing at him she passed through the short passage leading to the shop and thence to the cottage. Her dinner was waiting on the table. Miss Corrie, who had put it there, had gone back to the shop; she dined with her brother later.

Kitty could not eat. After a while she went up to her room and lay down for ten minutes.

The pity was that she did not spend the whole of her half-hour upstairs.

The first thing Corrie did on being left to himself, was to snatch from the floor, under the shadow of the desk, a five-pound note. Holding it stretched between his hands, he stood transfixed, while the clock ticked nearly a hundred seconds. Then his hands began to shake and sweat appeared on his face. . . . Two minutes later he left the office to take care of itself, going out by the public way. Keeping close to the wall he passed round behind the office and shop and into the yard at the back of the house. The place was not overlooked by neighbours, but he glanced keenly about him before he turned his gaze upwards. Above the ivy an attic window was wide open.

He tiptoed to an out-house; he tiptoed back with a ladder. He placed the ladder in position and climbed a few bars, halted, and made a show of doing something to the ivy. Ascending further, he repeated the performance. At last he was at the window. For a few seconds he remained with his body bent and stretched into the room, then he withdrew, descended the ladder, replaced it in the out-house, and returned to the office.

At 12.30 his niece appeared. He moved towards

the shop, seemed to change his mind, and came back. He cleared his throat, and said—

“I’ll check the cash.”

Hitherto the formality had always taken place after business hours, but the girl, too sick at heart to be surprised at anything, without hesitation or remark handed him her keys.

Before long Miss Corrie called him to dinner.

“It’ll ha’ to wait,” he returned, apparently immersed in his task.

At the end of twenty minutes he spoke.

“Here ! ”

She came over. “Anything wrong ? ” she asked wearily.

He pointed to the open drawer. “Ye’re short ! ”

“Nonsense ! Twenty-seven pounds—that’s been the only money order business to-day.”

“Well, there’s only twenty-two.”

“You’ve made a mistake,” she said, with reviving alertness. “Three fives and twelve singles.”

“Was that how Torrance gave ye the money ? Be very sure now !—Three fives and twelve singles ? Eh ? ”

“I’m perfectly sure,” she returned impatiently. “The notes must have stuck. How much do you make me short ? ”

“Count for yourself.”

She took them out and laid them on the counter. There was a short silence broken only by the rustle of the paper and the ticking of the clock.

Suddenly she raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes, without a word.

He stood her gaze for a brief space, then turned it to the notes. His fist banged the counter.

“Five pound short—a five-pound note—where is it ? ”

Still she stared at him silent.

“Can ye no answer ? ” he snarled at last.

She answered with an odd, slow smile. It maddened him. He strode across to the passage and shouted for his sister.

Miss Corrie came at once. “What’s the matter, John ? Mind, the lad’s in the shop.”

“Send him to his dinner.”

Kitty spoke. “No. I want a witness.”

“A witness ! ” screeched the woman. “What for ? ”

Corrie pushed her aside, and bawled—

“Peter, ye can go for your dinner now.” He waited until he heard a door open and close, then wheeled and said to his sister—“She’s five pound short.”

Miss Corrie threw up her hands.

"Yes," said Kitty quietly, "I'm five pounds short."

The woman was about to speak, but her brother motioned her to hold her tongue.

"I want to know where that five-pound note is. . . . Do ye hear me, girl?"

She paid not the slightest attention.

"See here, Rachel," he said, somewhat wildly, "she admits she got twenty-seven pound from Torrance this morning. She had the key o' the drawer all the time I was here my lone. As you and the boy can swear I never passed to the house. When I checked the cash in her presence, I found her five pound short. . . . And she won't say what's become o' it."

"Tell him," cried Miss Corrie. "Speak!"

"What's the use?" said the girl, and there was a pause.

"Were ye up the stair at your dinner-time?" he demanded.

No answer.

"Ay; I heard her," said her aunt.

"Then it's my duty to—to make a search," he said in a thick voice.

"Get the police," said Kitty. "They're honest."

He all but lost control then. "Up to your

room!" he roared. "Rachel, you maun come likewise."

Kitty turned and led the way. She felt that this was only the beginning of the ghastly farce. Nothing could possibly be found in her room unless her uncle contrived to put it there while he was pretending to search, and she would see to it that he was not allowed to manage that!

"If it's no in there," said Corrie, as they reached the small landing, "your aunt'll ha' to search your person. Go inside the two o' ye. I'll bide here. Rachel, you make search."

Kitty began to feel puzzled in a dull, dreary fashion. Her uncle could play no tricks from where he stood. Why should he make such a long business of the matter? He had failed to terrify her, and—

"Where'll I search?" wailed Miss Corrie.

"Every place. It's got to be found," replied her brother. "It's Government money."

"It'll take a long, long time. Would ye no give her another chance to—to speak?"

"She's had her chance. Hurry up!"

It was no doubt natural that Miss Corrie should start with the chest of drawers that served also for a dressing table, placed at an angle with the

window and near it. She drew out the right-hand top drawer.

“Turn it out on the floor,” he ordered.

Kitty sat down on the bed and apathetically watched the scattering of her poor little fineries, gloves, ribbons, fancy buttons, and so on.

“It’s no’ there, anyway,” remarked Rachel, rising at last.

She opened the neighbour drawer, and Kitty winced, for it held her father’s manuscripts.

“Oh!” gasped Rachel, and stood petrified.

“Hurry up!” called her brother, and she started.

“It—it’s here,” she whispered, and held it up.

Corrie strode in, snatched it and held it close to his niece’s face.

Kitty was white as death now. What dumb innocence, what loud defence, could stand against this?

Her aunt slunk from the room.

“Well,” said Corrie at last in a lowered voice, “I’ll let ye go free now; I’ll let ye go free till this time to-morrow—no, till ten o’clock to-morrow night. But if ye want to go free after that, ye know the way—the only way. Now ye can think over it. I’ll mind the office myself.”

With that he went out.

Had Kitty held a weapon of any sort then, she would certainly have tried to kill him.

* * * * *

In the evening her aunt brought her some tea, set it down, and retired without a word. But no restraint was put on her movements. Restraint was unnecessary. Where could she go, penniless? Later, when she heard Symington's voice in the kitchen, she stole downstairs and out of doors.

In the dusk, an hour afterwards, she stood at her old place, waiting the roaring approach, the thundering dash past, of the London mail. Colin Hayward would not be on board, she told herself, and wondered vaguely why, after all, he had left early in the morning. And now he would be in London, and things there would already be making him forget her. She did not love him as she judged a maid should love a man—but oh! how gladly she would have yielded now to his tender arms and his kind voice. . . .

The train was coming—it was nearly on her. Something white fluttered from a window. But the signal could not be for her!—and yet with her heart in her eyes she gazed. And just for a tick of time she had a glimpse of Colin's face. It was all over.

She laid her arms on the fence, and bowed her face on them, and wept as never she had wept in all her one-and-twenty years—such tears of bitterness, such tears of loneliness.

Perhaps Sam, quitting his post on the railway, may have wondered at the bowed figure, but he went off discreetly by his one way, a hundred yards further down the field.

In the starry darkness Kitty came to herself, and slowly made her way to the only home she had. Emotion had weakened her physically, but her spirit yet struggled strongly in the toils. She had still nearly twenty-four hours of freedom, such as it was. To-night it was too late for any persecution from Alec. Symington, who surely must have left the cottage some time ago, and gone home, for it was now nearing eleven o'clock.

But on the road, at the gate of the field, he was waiting.

CHAPTER V

“**A**REN'T you going to shake hands ? ” he asked. He was leaning on the gate, smoking a cigarette.

It was not so dark that the girl, who had halted a couple of yards away, could fail to see the smile accompanying the words. Symington's was by no means an ill-looking countenance, though forty years, half of them strenuous after a fashion, had blurred the fineness of the 'well-shaped features ; it would have been attractive, admirable even, but for something in the eyes, something about the mouth, under the nicely trimmed tawny moustache, that is not to be fully described by the word covetous. His was a face that no wise man would regard without doubts, that no wise woman would trust. Symington was tall and broad-shouldered, but in the light of day he had a softish look, and one imagined him as a “ fat man ” in the years soon to come. He was no hard-working farmer. White Farm had come

to him for lack of a worthier and fitter heir, his two brothers having died not long before his father, and there were honest people in the neighbourhood who would tell you that the good old property was already on the road to ruin. Symington's record was that of a man who had seen a good deal of life in different parts of the world, and learned little worth knowing, who had frequently touched the skirts of Fortune but never captured her, and who had gambled away more hours than he had toiled. And now, at forty, he was probably nearer to Fortune than he had ever been, and certainly nearer to love, as he understood it. For in Kitty Carstairs he had nothing to gain but youthful sweetness and fresh beauty ; indeed, in a material sense, the possession of her was going to cost him dear—if he kept his bond with the contemptible John Corrie.

“ Aren't you going to shake hands ? ” he asked again.

“ Please open the gate,” said Kitty, “ or I must go home another way.”

“ It's a lovely night, and your aunt knows I'm looking after you. I want to have a talk with you, Kitty.”

She sighed. “ I'm very tired—too tired to listen to any one. Please let me go.”

“ I won’t keep you long, and we can find a nice dry seat in the wood, since you’re so tired. Come, you needn’t be shy with me, Kitty——”

“ Are you going to open the gate ? ” she coldly asked.

“ Immediately, if you’ll promise——”

He turned sharply. Some one had come out of the little wood, and was crossing the road.

“ Is that you, Miss ? ”

“ Oh, Sam ! ” cried the girl in a gasp of relief.

“ Can ye no’ get the gate open ? ” the postman inquired, as though no Symington had been there. He came forward and laid a hand on the bolt.

“ What the blazes do you want ? ” blurted Symington, suddenly erect.

“ I’m thinking Miss Carstairs is due home by now,” Sam said coolly. “ What do ye say, Miss ? ”

“ Miss Carstairs is in my charge, you interfering fool ? ”

“ No, no, Sam ; I’m not !—and I want to get home at once.”

“ Kindly stand aside, Mr. Symington,” said the postman.

“ Stand aside—for you ! ” exclaimed Symington in a fury. With an ugly laugh and a curse he drove his fist at the little man’s face, sending

him down in a heap. "That's to go on with," he said, and strolled off.

"Oh, you coward!" cried Kitty, wrenching open the gate. "Are you badly hurt, Sam?"

Sam was already rising, holding his aching jaw. Inwardly he was raging, but all he said then was, "All right, Miss. My turn'll maybe come. And now I'll be seeing ye home."

She caught his arm, for he seemed in need of support.

"Ye're trembling, Miss," he remarked, "and no wonder. Never mind; it's all over now. But I'd just like to hear ye say ye didna think me too interfering-like."

"Oh," she said earnestly, "I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come. I'll be grateful to you as long as——"

"There, there! It's a reward to hear that ye didna want his company, for he's a rotten bad one."

They walked a little way in silence, and then a sob escaped the girl. She was at the end of her wits and her courage. Few of us can struggle alone all the time, and she knew that Sam had saved her only for a matter of so many hours.

"Come, cheer up, Miss," he said kindly. "Ye wasna in the office to-night, and your aunt told

me ye wasna so well, so it's no wonder ye're upset. Still——”

“Sam,” she interrupted, “I'm going to tell you everything—nearly everything. You're the only soul I can trust.” And in whispered, spasmodic sentences she poured forth her tale.

Sam was more than shocked; he was overwhelmed.

“To think of it, to think of it!” he repeated feebly a dozen times before wrath and pity took command of his honest soul. Then he was for taking John Corrie by the throat, and shaking all but the last breath out of his body, for telling Miss Corrie exactly what he thought of her, and for presenting Kitty with his savings, yea, and his own little abode, to enable her to stand independent of her unnatural relatives.

She was half-laughing, half-crying, by the time he paused for breath.

“Oh, Sam, you know I'd never allow you to do any of those things for my sake, but I'll never forget your goodness. You mustn't do anything, or I'll wish I hadn't told you. But I do want you to advise me what to do.”

“I never liked John Corrie,” he cried, “nor did any soul in Dunford; but I never doubted he was a straight man. But dinna ye be afraid

for the five-pun' note business—dinna ye be afraid for that ! ”

“ But that's what I am afraid of ! I might escape from Mr. Symington by simply going away, but not from——”

“ Your uncle would never dare to——”

“ Dare ? After what he's done, what would he not dare ? And he's clever in his way. How did he get that five-pound note into my drawer ? ”

Sam's hand went to his mouth. A sound not unlike a chuckle became the beginning of a fit of coughing. When it had passed he said—

“ We'll maybe find that out yet, so dinna let it bother ye too much, Miss. But if he tries to frighten ye, let me know, and I'll deal wi' him—by gravy, I'll deal wi' him ! ”

“ Sam, you must be careful. What if he got you into trouble, and you lost your——”

“ I can take care o' myself,” said Sam, “ except, maybe at the boxing—and I didna get fair play from that scoundrel.” He laughed ruefully.

“ The beast ! ”

“ Well, well, as I said, my turn'll maybe come—and yours'll come to a certainty, Miss. Keep up your heart. Are ye feeling a bit better now ? ”

“ Oh, yes,” she answered warmly. “ It’s not so awful when one isn’t all alone.”

“ Poor, pretty thing ! ” he said gently, “ ye’ll win through yet. . . . And now we’re nearly there, and I’d best no be seen wi’ ye. We’ll get a talk at sorting-time in the morning.”

“ Unless I’m forbidden the office.”

“ If your uncle does that, we’ll just ha’ to find another way.”

With a hurried pat on her shoulder, he turned and went.

* * * * *

The cottage door was not locked. Having entered, Kitty stood still for a moment, listening. Silence. She turned into the kitchen to find it, as she had scarcely dared to hope, unoccupied. Her aunt and uncle had evidently retired for the night. A candle burned on the table. A jug of milk, bread and butter were there also. Somehow the sight of food stirred her sense of humour. She had read of a murderer being treated to an egg with his breakfast on the morning of his execution, and it had struck her as pathetically absurd. Never before had such an attention been paid her. She drank a little milk, because she was thirsty, and went upstairs.

On the chest of drawers in her room she found

a piece of yellow wrapping paper bearing her aunt's writing in pencil.

“Do your work in the office to-morrow morning as usual.”

So her uncle intended to keep his promise that she should “go free” until the following night. But after that, what?

If Kitty had disliked Symington in the past, she hated him, nay, detested him now. Yes, and despised him. His assault on Sam had brought about the last. To give Symington his due, he had regretted the blow almost at once. It had been a stupid blunder to make in Kitty's presence. Her indignant, contemptuous words had told him that.

He had gone home angry with himself, cursing the postman, feeling that it would be inadvisable, if not fatal, to approach the girl again until the thing had cooled in her mind. Then he could apologize, blaming the outburst on his overpowering desire for her. Yes, he had better give her a week, during which Old Corrie would, of course, continue to exert his influence. Meantime he would make a trip to London. Whether he liked it or not, he must convert a few Zeniths into cash.

Kitty endured a bad two hours before sleep

came, but nature won at last, and she passed the remainder of the night in blessed unconsciousness.

* * * * *

With the morning mail-bags Sam arrived in a heated condition, puffing and blowing.

“I was in such a hurry to see how ye was, Miss,” he explained. “Keeping up your heart?”

She gave him a nod and a brave smile. Poor old Sam! he was good and kind and willing, but how could he really help her from her hideous plight?

They fell to work on the contents of the sacks, and the minutes ticked past.

“Registered letter, Miss,” said Sam, throwing it to her end of the counter, as he usually did with such a packet.

She was about to lay it aside for attention later when the address caught her eye. A cry escaped her.

Sam turned to see her, white as a ghost, tearing at the envelope.

“Oh, what can it be?” she whispered. Then, as if courage failed her, “Sam, come and take it. Tell me what it’s all about. I—I daren’t look. It may be nothing much, after all.”

Sam’s fingers were none too steady as he received the envelope. “Registered at Glasgow,”

he muttered, and proceeded to extract the contents.

These were a fairly plump number of bank-notes, and a half-sheet of paper bearing the words—

“From an old friend of your father.” . . . Sam read them aloud while she stood rigid with her face in her hands.

“Am I to count them?” he asked.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Five-pun’ notes,” he said, and there followed a rustling pause. “Twenty o’ them—a hundred pound. . . . See!” he took one of her hands from her face, and pressed the bundle into it. “Feel them—they’re real, ye poor, pretty thing!”

CHAPTER VI

SAM was doomed to be late in starting on his round that morning. The moment Kitty's mind grasped the significance of the windfall her tongue was loosed. She talked excitedly, even wildly. The sender of the notes—she wished he had given his name—must be some one whom her father had helped in the old days. Her father was always lending money that never came back. That was why there was none when he died. She hoped she might some day discover the sender, otherwise he could never realize how much more than kind, how truly wonderful, was the thing he had done. For he had given a desperate, persecuted girl her freedom!

“But what are ye going to do, Miss?” Sam ventured at last.

“I'm going to trust you,” she said, with a broken laugh.

“Aye, surely ye can do that. But I hope ye're

no' for being reckless. Your eyes are shining something terrible."

She laughed again, and said, "I'm going to London!"

"London!"

"To-night!"

It took Sam some moments to recover. "But what's taking ye a' the road to London?"

"I've always wanted to go. I've always said I would go if I had the money—and now I've got it!"

"Ha' ye friends in London?"

"I've no enemies."

"Oh, but this'll never do!" he cried. "What'll happen to ye?"

"Perhaps I'll have some adventures—I hope so—an'——"

"Adventures, guid God!"

"—And I may make my fortune."

He threw up his hands muttering, "Oh, dear! the money has turned her head!"

She laid her hand on his arm. "I want you to help me," she said softly; "that is, if you can do it without getting yourself into trouble. The express stops at Kenny Junction at five minutes to nine, but that's six miles away, and I must take some luggage——"

“Mercy on us!” he exclaimed, “how can ye think it out so quick?”

“I’ve thought it out, and dreamed of it, and cried about it, Sam, oh, a hundred times! Now, can you get some one with a cart, or anything on wheels, to meet me, secretly, outside of the village, at seven o’clock?”

He gave her a long look. “Will ye no’ think over it, Miss?” he asked at last.

“I’m going to-night. Can’t you imagine what life here, with those people, must be?”

“Aye,” he said slowly. “No’ to be endured, I dare say. But”—he became timid—“I mun ask ye a question, Miss, whether it offends ye or no. It—it’s about young Mr. Hayward. Ye’re no’ running away wi’ him, are ye?”

Once more she laughed. “I had forgotten all about him,” she said truthfully. “What a question to ask!” Then she flushed a little.

He looked abashed as he murmured—

“Young folks do stupid things in haste, and it was for both your sakes I asked the question. Well, well,” he went on, “if your mind’s made up, I suppose I canna change it.”

“And you’ll see about a cart, Sam?” she said eagerly.

“No, I’ll no’ do that!”

“What? . . . why?”

“Because when ye leave your uncle’s house, when ye leave Dunford, ye mun leave wi’ your head high and your name fair. Think, Miss! What’ll it mean if ye creep away as if—as if ye was guilty? Why, it would mean that your uncle would be free to make a scandal, aye, and maybe do something worse——”

“But he can prove me guilty as it is! And do you think for a moment he would let me go?”

“Will ye trust me, Miss?”

“Of course, Sam.”

“Ye promise?”

“Yes; if you won’t keep me from going?”

“Then ye’ve promised! Now listen, for we’ll maybe no’ get another chance to arrange it. At seven o’clock to-night ye’ll ha’ your bag and things ready, and ye’ll come down the stair, wi’ neither fear nor trembling, and ye’ll open the door, and ye’ll find me waiting wi’ a cart——”

“But, Sam, Sam——”

“And if your uncle or your aunt asks where ye’re going, answer the truth. But if they try to stop ye, leave them to me. That’s all. If ye canna trust me——”

“Oh, but I will—I do!” she cried, “though I don’t understand——”

“ Then it’s settled, and I just hope I’m no’ doing a bad thing for ye in helping ye. . . . And now the folk’ll be wondering what’s come over their letters.”

Kitty was not sorry to discover that she had only five minutes left for breakfast. She was all apprehension lest her nerves or her looks should betray her. The slightest appearance of cheerfulness, she felt, would alone be fatal. Fortunately, her uncle had left the table, and was immersed in the morning paper at the fireside. Zeniths had fallen half a crown, and it seemed to him the beginning of the end. His niece’s engagement to Symington twelve hours hence would not take place a moment too soon. He never doubted that the girl would give in.

Miss Corrie, silent, her face a melancholy mask, was beginning to tidy up things.

Not a word was spoken during the girl’s brief stay at the table, but when she rose to go to open the office her uncle spoke from behind the paper.

“ Ye’ll mind what I told ye ? ”

Without response she made for the door. And just then her mind was suddenly confronted with a new difficulty. She was expected to be on duty in the post office until 8 p.m. . . . and yet she must have her things packed and be ready for

Sam an hour earlier. At the door she turned, feeling it was now or never. In a voice that shook naturally enough she said—

“I don’t think I can stop in the office till eight to-night. I’m too tired.”

There was a silence full of acute suspense, until he returned grudgingly—

“Very well. Your aunt can take charge after tea.”

She hurried away, her heart thumping with relief. She would have nearly an hour and a half to herself before the hour of departure. Heaven help her to keep her self-control till then. She told herself she did not doubt Sam, and yet . . .

“John,” said Miss Corrie, “do ye think she’ll give in?”

“She darena face the other thing.”

After a pause—“John, what do ye think she wanted the five-pun’ note for?”

“Ye can ask her.”

“She might ha’ got a safer place to hide it than she did——”

“Will ye hold your silly tongue, woman! Zeniths went down two-and-six yesterday. I’m going up to White Farm.”

* * * * *

Eleven hours later Kitty stood in her room

ready to go. It was seven o'clock, but she was allowing a minute or two to pass in order to make sure of Sam's being there. Her courage was at ebb, and she was very pale. Yet she hoped she might escape from the house without being noticed. The best of her worldly goods were contained in a bag and hold-all, part of her luggage of five years ago.

At last she felt she must go or faint. She opened the door softly and picked up her burdens. The bag was heavy. She was taking her father's manuscripts. Stealthily she stepped across the small landing, and began to descend. But it was impossible to move, laden as she was, on that narrow, wooden stair without making considerable noise. And as she reached the bottom she was confronted by her uncle, who had just shut the shop for the night.

"What's this?" he demanded with an awful frown, as he blocked the way to the front door.

Kitty's heart all but failed her. She cleared her throat, wet her lips, and managed to utter the words—

"I'm going to London."

For a moment the man was stupefied. Then his shout went down the passage leading to shop and post office—

“ Rachel !—here, quick ! ”

In desperation Kitty sought to push past. He seized her arm. He was breathing hard ; his face was the colour of putty

Miss Corrie appeared.

“ What is it ? Oh ! ” she exclaimed, perceiving the luggage.

“ She’s mad,” said her brother thickly, “ says she going to London. Liker to jail ! ”

“ How can she go to London or any place ? ” cried the woman, “ unless—did ye check the cash, John ? ”

“ Aunt Rachel ! ” exclaimed the girl.

“ Take her luggage up the stair, Rachel,” Corrie ordered. “ We’ll ha’ to do something——”

The door was opened from the outside. Sam stood on the step. Beyond him, at the gate of the little garden, was a pony cart he had borrowed or hired.

“ Are ye ready, Miss ? ” said Sam, cheerfully.

Corrie strode to the door, his face working with passion.

“ What the —— do ye mean ? ” he demanded threateningly.

“ Miss Carstairs,” said Sam, without flinching, “ is for London, and it’s my pleasure to drive her to the junction.”

“He’s mad, too,” screamed Miss Corrie. “Shut the door in his face.”

Swiftly Sam stepped inside, and closed the door.

“Mr. Corrie,” he said quietly, “I would advise ye no’ to interfere.” To Kitty—“I’ll take your luggage, Miss.”

Corrie, beside himself, raised his fist.

“Wait,” said the other, still calmly. “The folk in Dunford are maybe dull, but I could tell them a thing, Mr. Corrie, that would make them spit on ye in the street, and maybe pull your house and shop about your ears. . . . Come, Miss.”

“Move a step, and I send for the policeman,” roared Corrie.

“In which case,” retorted the postman, “I’ll just ha’ to give ye in charge. For what, I ask ye, was ye doin’ up the ladder yesterday, about 12.30 p.m. ? ”

“By God, postman, I’ll——”

“I’m askin’ ye a straight question. I was comin’ down the hill at the time, but I’ve guid sight still, and what’s more I had a witness. Ye can say ye was paying attention to yer ivy—an’ truth it needs it!—but in that case, I would ask ye if the ivy was growing inside o’ this young lady’s bedroom. . . . Come, Miss. He’ll no’ touch ye.” And opening the door, and then

gently pushing Corrie out of the way, he took possession of the bag and hold-all.

And he and the girl passed out without hindrance.

When they had gone the woman turned a ghastly face on her brother.

“John, ye mun tell me what he meant about the ladder.”

As if he had not heard, Corrie staggered out of the house and took the road to White Farm.

Sam put his charge into the express with many injunctions and a package of sweets. Kitty had scarcely spoken during the drive, and now speech failed her altogether. She could only cling to his rough hand, and nod her promises to send her address, when she found one, and let him know if ever she required help. He was a lonely man, and she had given him a new and great interest in life.

They were too much engrossed at the last minute to notice a high-wheeled gig dash up to the station gate and deposit a passenger who entered the train lower down just as it was starting.

There were three other passengers in the compartment, all more or less inclined to doze. Though deadly tired, Kitty had no inclination for sleep. Nor could she give a thought to the

future. Not so soon could her mind and nerves recover from the strain and shock of the last two days.

After Carlisle, however, she found herself alone, and the solitude began to have a soothing effect. She lay back in her corner and closed her eyes. The great train—the dear, kind monster she had so often watched and longed to travel on—thundered out its miles southward, and at two in the morning slumber was not far from the exhausted girl.

Kitty gave a little sigh of content—and opened her eyes.

The door of the compartment slid back. Alec. Symington entered.

CHAPTER VII

FOR a moment or two Kitty was terror-stricken. Then common sense came to her aid. She was free, she was independent: the man might annoy her with his attentions, but he could not harm her. She sat up and met his smile with a grave look of inquiry.

“This is a pleasant surprise, Kitty,” he said, seating himself directly opposite. “Rather a crowd in my part of the train, and I was hunting for a compartment with room to spare when fortune led me here,” he lied. “Not often I’m so lucky.”

Kitty made no response.

“You might have let me know you were going to make a journey,” he said pleasantly, “but perhaps you decided on it since I saw you.” He glanced at her things on the rack. “I see you are going all the way. Well, so much the better for me—eh? Come, Kitty, be friendly and say something.”

“I have nothing to say, Mr. Symington.”

“You’re thinking of last night—or, to be correct, the night before last. Well, I’m glad of this chance of apologizing. I’m sorry I struck the postman, but I was mad with the man for interfering, you know. I had something to tell you, Kitty, something I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time. . . . Well, are you going to forgive me?”

“You had better ask Sam that. You didn’t hurt me—you only disgusted me. I think you should try to find a seat in another compartment.” She was quite cool now. Indeed, she was not sorry to have the opportunity of humiliating him for Sam’s sake.

At her words his face took on a dusky shade, but he asked quietly enough, “Is that quite fair, Kitty?”

“You have no right to my name.” Had she owned a book then she would have opened it. She turned to the window, let up the blind, and sought to ignore him by peering out into the darkness; but if she thought thus to get rid of his company, or even silence him, she was mistaken.

“You are a very foolish little girl,” he said presently. “Here you are, running away to London, where you haven’t a friend——”

“ Who told you that ? ” she demanded, turning on him.

“ Well, have you ? ”

“ Yes ! ” It was true. She had suddenly remembered that Colin was there, not that she expected ever to meet him. But the inspiration served her purpose : Symington was taken aback.

“ Then it is some one your uncle does not know of,” he said sharply, and wished he had not spoken, for she was quick to retort—

“ So my uncle told you I was in the train, though you pretended to be surprised to see me ! I may be foolish, Mr. Symington, but I’m not utterly stupid.”

“ You are—delightfully stupid,” he returned, restraining his temper, “ if you think I’m going to let you disappear into London before I have seen what your friend is like. London is a dangerous place, as you would know if you had ever shown your pretty face in it before. Now don’t get excited. Be reasonable—patient, if you like to call it that. I don’t wonder at your running away from your awful relations and that dead-alive village, but what are you going to do in London ? ”

Kitty, now both angry and uneasy, did not reply.

“ I don’t mean to be impertinent,” he went on, “ but I can’t help being aware that you have no money—or, at least, very little. Now in London——”

“ You needn’t concern yourself whether I have money or not,” she interrupted hotly. “ You will force me to leave this——”

“ Please—just a moment. I can’t help concerning myself—no man could—in the circumstances. And as I happen to be a man who is in love with you—oh, you know it very well——”

She rose to take her things from the rack. It was certainly not a wise move. With a strange laugh he sprang up and caught her, prisoning her arms.

“ Silly little girl,” he whispered passionately, “ to think you can be quit of me so easily ! No, no ! I’ve got you and I mean to keep you. Don’t struggle—it’s no use. There ! ” he had her fast. They swayed a little with the movement of the train. “ Now listen, Kitty,” he continued, “ you’ll like me better when you know me better. I’m not a bad sort, and I can give you things you’ve never dreamed of. Let’s be friends for the present. I won’t hurry you about the other thing.” His voice sounded a little breathless. “ In a few hours we’ll be in London.

If your friend is there, good and well ; but if not, you must let me look after you—show you where to stay, and so on. Leave everything to me. We'll have a jolly good time while you're getting to know me——”

Wrenching one of her hands free she struck him in the face.

“ You beast ! ”

Doubtless the word stung more than the blow. A madness grew in his eyes.

“ By Heavens, I'll kiss you for that ! ” he cried—and let her go with a stifled curse. The girl sank into her corner, ruddy. The man sat down, ghastly.

The corridor door was drawn back by a young woman in rather fashionable attire. In her left hand she had a “ sevenpenny, ” a finger marking the place. Without a glance at either occupant she stepped in and, leaving the door open, seated herself and began to read.

Kitty had again turned her face to the window, and soon the shameful glow faded, leaving her pale. The natural reaction came, and she wanted to cry. Symington's colour, on the other hand, had risen. Once more he sat opposite, looking hot and sulky. After a little while he produced his cigarette case, but he put it back unopened.

He would have given something for a newspaper, though it had been a week old. He was furious with the intruder, and now and then took a stealthy glance at her which might possibly have alarmed her had she observed it. Now and then, also, he took such a glance at Kitty, and at last discovered that she was on the verge of tears. Confound it! she must not be allowed to make a scene. He transferred himself to her side.

"Look here, Kitty, it's all right," he whispered, and surreptitiously put his hand on her elbow.

She started as if from pollution. "Can't you leave me alone?" she said under her breath. "I'll never want to see you again, but I'll hate you a little less, perhaps, if you go back to the compartment you came from—anywhere out of this."

Nettled, he replied, "You may as well make up your mind that I'm going to see you start safe in London."

She drew away from him as far as possible and resumed her study of the darkness.

Symington, trying to look as if he had not been rebuffed, lay back, folded his arms and stared openly, rather rudely at the intruder, who was now making a pencil jotting on the fly-leaf of her

book. When she had finished writing she went back to the printed page, read for a few moments, and stopped as if an idea had struck her. She put up her hand and pressed the button labelled "Attendant." Then she returned to the story.

It was beginning to dawn on Symington that she was not a bad looking girl, though she must be a pure idiot, when a steward from the sleeping-car appeared in the doorway. The man saluted the girl respectfully, and as though he were pleased to see her.

"Didn't know you were travelling with us to-night, Miss," he remarked.

She smiled upon him, and tearing out the fly-leaf, folded and handed it to him with a look which apparently he understood. He bowed and retired.

Symington had got the length of admitting to himself that in other circumstances she might have made a pleasant enough travelling companion, when the official again appeared. Not a little to Symington's surprise it was himself who the man now addressed.

"Excuse me, sir," came the polite English speech, "but I can find you a comfortable seat in another part of the train."

After a slight pause—"Thanks," said Symington shortly, "but I'm pretty well where I am."

"Sorry sir, but this compartment is reserved for ladies only," said the other, politely as before, and proceeded to affix to the window a label bearing out his statement.

Symington hesitated, but he had the wit to realize that there was nothing for it but to go. Bluster would only make him ridiculous. With what dignity he could command he said to Kitty, "I'll see you when we arrive," favoured the intruder with a scowl which ought to have slain her, but which nearly made her smile, and followed the official.

And Kitty began to sob helplessly, her face in her handkerchief.

At the end of, perhaps, a couple of minutes she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and was aware that the intruder was sitting down beside her.

"If you cry any longer," said a calm low-pitched voice, "I'll be thinking I did the wrong thing in interfering. Besides, the attendant will be here immediately with some tea for us, and he might think he had done the wrong thing, too. Also, you have nothing to cry about now—have you?"

“ Oh,” said Kitty, wiping her eyes with one hand and groping for the stranger’s with the other, “ the relief was too much for me. How can I ever thank you for being so kind and c-clever ! ”

“ You can postpone that till another day, Miss Carstairs—don’t be alarmed : I saw it on your luggage,” the other said, with a reassuring hand-clasp. “ Mine’s Hildā Risk, though I’m quite a cautious person, as a rule. To-night I made an exception,” she went on, giving Kitty time to recover herself, “ and interfered in a way that must have seemed rather extraordinary to you. But I simply couldn’t help it. I noticed you before you got into the train, and I saw you were troubled and nervous. I noticed the—oh, well, the gentleman arrive at the last moment and get on board after glaring about him. And as I happened to be just next door to you, and in a seat next the corridor, I observed him prowling along, ever so often, and taking stock of your compartment. And every time he appeared, I admired him less—I hardly know why. And the last time he came I saw him grin. And when he entered your compartment I tried calling myself a fool, and telling myself it was none of my business, but I couldn’t rest, and after a little while I took the

chance of putting my foot in it dreadfully—and you know the rest. Feeling better now ? ”

“ Oh, yes, thank you,” Kitty answered, turning her attention from her eyes to her pretty hair. “ But you were so cool ! ”

“ I suppose I was. Once I’ve made up my mind to do a thing, I get that way. Besides, I’m never afraid of a man ! ”

“ Never afraid of a man ! ” cried Kitty in tones of such amazement that her new friend checked a laugh.

“ No ; because, you see, a man in his soul is always afraid of a woman. It’s a useful thing to remember, Miss Carstairs.”

“ But—but do you—hate men ? ”

“ On the contrary ! Most of my friends are men. Here comes the tea ; now we’ll be happy ! ”

The attendant placed the tray on the seat, beamed on Miss Risk and withdrew.

Kitty looked like crying again.

“ I believe you’re hungry,” said Hilda. “ Fall to on the bread and butter, and I’ll pour out. It requires a little practice, you know.” She proceeded to talk about herself, explaining, much to Kitty’s interest, that she was a journalist. “ Most of my work consists of ‘ specials ’ for *The Lady’s Mirror*, rather a swagger weekly, though

quite young. I 'do' all sorts of big functions, swell weddings, and so forth. I've a knack for making dreary things look bright in print, also a knack for making the dull remarks of prominent persons seem brilliant. These are the chief reasons, I fancy, why the Editor sends me all the way from London instead of employing some one on the spot. I have just come from Aberdeen, and if you read my article in the next week's *Mirror*, you will imagine that I was in fairyland instead of in the worst of weather, at a damaged garden party, among a few hundred ordinary humans who wished themselves at home! But I enjoyed myself—I generally do."

She looked as if she did, thought Kitty, venturing for the first time to take note of her new friend's appearance. Hilda inclined to fairness. Her hair was a pale brown without tinge of red, and her fine skin was almost pale, though the lips were warmly coloured. Her nose was short and straight, her chin, while nicely rounded, hinted at a certain boldness—not aggressiveness—of character. Her dark, bluish-grey eyes were unusually wide-set, and this peculiarity—for it was such—affected you first as merely piquant, but ere long as very charming with its suggestion

of sincerity and honesty. She was probably six or seven years older than Kitty. She chatted on about herself and her work till she saw that Kitty had made a fair meal.

“Feeling pretty fit now, aren’t you ? ” she said encouragingly, and rang the bell.

“Oh, quite different; I don’t know what to say to you, Miss Risk,” Kitty said gratefully. “You’ve been so good to me—and you don’t know a thing about me.”

“May I ask two questions ? ”

“Ask anything—please.”

“Just two for the present. Have you friends meeting you at Euston ? ”

“No.”

“And where do you want to go on your arrival in London ? ”

“I—I don’t know.”

Hilda nodded gravely. “I see you have a story,” she said, “but even if you wish to tell it, I want you to keep it back—for the present, at any rate. You and I must have a nap, or we shall be mere wrecks at the end of the journey—and I’ve pages to cover before lunch-time. Ah, here he comes ! ”

The attendant appeared carrying pillows and rugs. “I don’t think you’ll be disturbed, Miss,”

he said, ere he retired with the tray and the silver Hilda had laid on it.

Two minutes later she had Kitty tucked up on one of the seats.

“Now go to sleep without wasting a moment in worrying over what’s going to happen a few hours hence. We’ll manage nicely. Leave it to me.”

And Kitty left it. She was not used to being taken care of, but even the novelty of that experience did not long withstand slumber. In a few minutes she had forgotten it along with her weariness and woes.

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As the porter took their things, Hilda whispered to Kitty—

“Don’t look about you; and if you happen to see him, don’t show it. Come along!”

Presently, they were driving westwards in an open taxi-cab. It was a lovely morning, and the air was delicious after the confinement of the long journey.

“What a nice country colour you have,” Hilda remarked, “but you’re not a country-bred girl, are you?”

“Why do you say that?”

"Because you take all this as a matter of course."

"You mean that I don't seem excited? But, you see, I—I'm wondering."

"Where we are going?" said Hilda, taking a quick glance behind.

"Am I rude?"

"Not at all. A most natural thing to wonder about. Well, at the present, we are going to call—just for a moment—on my rich and only brother, who does not approve of my way of life, though he's as good as any brother could be. After I have given him a message you are coming home with me for breakfast—and that's enough to go on with, I hope."

"But you don't know anything about me!" cried Kitty.

Hilda's smile was very kind. "I certainly don't know your pedigree, nor the name and address of your dentist; but I believe I could guess almost as much as you could tell me concerning your recent troubles. However, you can tell me what you will, later on. Meantime, take it easy and get up an appetite."

The cab turned to the left, negotiating a maze of streets of varied aspect, and at last drew up at the imposing doorway of Aberdare Mansions.

"We shall take our things with us," said Hilda, "and find another cab when we need it."

In the hall, waiting for the lift, she said: "Now don't be alarmed. Our friend of last night followed us in another taxi, and has doubtless noted the address. I fancied he would do something like that, and accordingly we have stopped here."

"To put him on a wrong scent!" Kitty exclaimed almost gleefully. "How clever you are!"

"Now let's go up and give my brother the message. Our things can lie here till we come down again. In you go!"

They soared to the fourth floor, where the conductress rang at the door on the right. A discreet-looking man-servant opened, and permitted himself to smile a welcome.

"Good morning, Sharp," said Hilda. "We're not coming in. I want to see Mr. Risk for twenty seconds. As it's so early, he may come in his dressing-gown. Tell him it's most urgent."

Possibly Sharp was used to Miss Risk's ways, for he went without hesitation, and before long his master, garbed as Hilda had suggested, came forward. He was tall, thin, clean-shaven, and

you would have known him as Hilda's brother by his eyes.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed at the sight of Kitty. "I beg your pardon!" he added quickly. "What is it, Hilda?"

"Just this, John. If a gentleman, more or less, should call here with inquiries about a Miss Kitty Carstairs, you will oblige by treating him as you would treat an undesirable person inquiring for your own sister. And please instruct Sharp accordingly."

"Very well," said Mr. Risk, without the slightest emotion of any kind. "I'll remember, and so shall Sharp. But may I know the gentleman's name, more or less?"

Hilda turned to Kitty. "Would you mind?"

"Mr. Symington," murmured Kitty, with a lovely, shameful colour.

"Thank you. . . . But, my dear sister, where are your manners?"

It was Hilda's turn to blush. "Oh, Miss Carstairs, do forgive me! That wretched man put everything out of my head. Let me introduce my brother, Mr. Risk—Miss Carstairs."

Mr. Risk held out his hand—apparently he had forgotten his costume—and the embarrassed girl could not but take it.

"I never wonder at my sister making friends," he said pleasantly, "but I do marvel that she keeps any. Well, Hilda, won't you and Miss Carstairs stay and take breakfast with me?"

"Impossible—thanks all the same. Good-bye, John, and don't forget the name."

"I will," he retorted teasingly, "and treat all inquiring gentlemen as you requested."

Hilda went laughing into the lift, and Kitty, feeling the friendly clasp of her arm, smiled almost happily.

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CHAPTER VIII

AT the same hour, some four hundred miles away, Kitty's absence was being felt. It was time to open the post office, and John Corrie was realizing that he would have more than enough to do until he secured a new assistant—whom he would have to pay!

Corrie had just opened the shop. Outside the boy was cleaning the windows; inside Miss Corrie was setting things straight on the provision counter. He himself was bending at the open safe, taking out the usual supplies of silver and copper for the tills. These were contained in ancient battered pewter mugs, and now he laid the mugs on the floor preparatory to closing and locking up the safe.

An impatient knocking came from the post office, and he cursed under his breath. But it was already five minutes past eight, and it would never do to have talk about the office not being opened punctually. Rising, he called to his sister to look after the money, and hastened away to admit the knocker.

Miss Corrie moved listlessly towards the safe. Her face had a drawn look. She had not slept. She had spoken scarce a word to her brother since Kitty's departure, and neither she nor Sam, whom she had helped with the sorting this morning, had referred to the previous evening's affair. Sam and Corrie had not yet met.

But, a yard from the safe, the woman's listlessness vanished, her face flamed, and then went more pallid than ever. Never before had her brother done such a thing!!—gone out of the shop, leaving his keys in the safe. Her opportunity at last!

She ran softly to the door that opened on the post office and put her ear to it. Several persons were demanding the postmaster's attention. There was time as well as opportunity! She darted back to the safe . . . opened it, then the drawer on the left . . . searched . . . and found what she sought—the letter written to her brother by Kitty's father when he was dying. She hid it in her bosom, to read when she might safely do so. She left the safe as she had found it, took up the mugs of money and proceeded to supply the tills with change. The letter seemed to scorch her breast. She could not wait.

Summoning the boy, she bade him keep an eye

on the shop for a few minutes, and passed into the cottage. In the kitchen, she seated herself at the hearth and, quaking, took out the letter. The only portion which concerns us is the following :—

“ You may perhaps find nothing in the enclosed share certificates (which, please note, are ‘ bearer ’) but a fresh evidence of my folly in worldly matters. Still, the Zenith Gold Mine is the only thing of the kind I ever put hard-earned money into. There are 5,000 £1 shares, and I paid 2s. apiece for them, and at the moment they are unsaleable. I acted on the advice of a friend who had seen the property, and who had knowledge of such things. He was convinced that the mine would come right in time—meaning years—and pay big dividends. Well, he may have been all wrong, and I the silliest of poor fools ; but now, John, I put the shares in your keeping as a ‘ possibility ’ for Kitty, when she comes of age. I have never mentioned them to her—certainly not with any reference to herself—for I don’t want her to be more disappointed in me than I can help. Give them to her when she is twenty-one, and show her this letter, and if by any chance they are worth money then, or later, she will at least

repay you what she may have cost you—though, of course, I am hoping she will earn enough to do that as she goes along.

“N.B.—Should you hear of the shares rising before then, you will just use your discretion, and do the best you can for my girl.”

Miss Corrie swayed as though she would fall. “So that’s why he would never let me read it properly!” she muttered. “Oh, John Corrie, what ha’ ye done!”

After a little while she obtained control over her body. “What made him keep a thing like that? It should ha’ been burned—burned and forgot!”

She reached forward, held the letter over the fire—and drew it back. “But what if he misses it from the safe?”

In miserable uncertainty she began to re-read the document. In the midst of it she went rigid. Her brother was coming through the shop, calling her. Her fingers fumbled at her bodice. Too late! In her panic her eye was caught by the morning’s paper lying on the floor at her side. She snatched it up, pushed the letter into the folds, and made pretence of reading.

“What’s wrong wi’ ye?” said Corrie, entering.

"I was just looking at the price of Zeniths," she stammered.

"Away and attend to the post office," he returned. "I mun be in the shop this forenoon. . . . D'ye hear me?"

"Aye." To take the paper with her would be sheer madness, she reflected quickly; besides he was done with it. She would come back for it at the first opportunity. Letting it fall where she had found it, she got up and left the kitchen.

He followed her, growling.

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At half-past eleven, the morning delivery finished, Sam, as was his custom, came into the shop to purchase a paper.

"There's no' one left," said the boy.

From the opposite counter, where he was serving a customer, Corrie called to the boy—

"Ye'll get one in the house." It was not the first time he had sold his own paper to the postman.

So presently the boy came back with the paper, and Sam, folding it up, put it in his pocket, and went home to see what was happening in the great world.

CHAPTER IX

FORTUNATELY for his stomach's sake, at any rate, it was the weekly half-holiday, so that Mr. Corrie, having closed the shop at one, was free to relieve his sister in the post office and dispatch her to prepare, with all speed, something in the way of dinner. He was a little astonished at the eagerness with which she departed to do his bidding.

A minute later she was back, looking as though she had seen a ghost.

“John, where's the paper?”

“What paper?”

“The morning paper. Quick!—what ha' ye done wi' it?”

He turned from the counter with a grunt of impatience. “Get my dinner ready and never heed about the paper! If ye want to ken, Zeniths dropped six-and-threepence yesterday—no' that it matters to us now. Away wi' ye and hurry up.”

“John, for the love o’ God, tell me where the paper is !”

That startled him. “What the mischief’s wrong wi’ ye, woman ?” he demanded, regarding her frowningly. “Sam, the postman, got the paper. There wasna another in the shop——”

For a moment’s space she gazed at him as though he had said something too awful for belief. Then, with a wail, she threw up her hands.

“It’s the beginning o’ the judgment !”

“What d’ye mean ? Are ye daft ?” He seized her roughly by the arm. “Speak !”

“The letter was inside the paper,” she moaned.

“The letter ! What letter ?”

“Hugh Carstairs’ letter about the shares. . . . I took it from the safe to read it. . . . When I heard ye coming to the kitchen I was feared, and I hid it in the paper. . . . I—I didna mean to betray ye, John, but—oh, dinna look at me like that !”

“Ye—— !” he stormed, “ye’ve ruined me, damned me !” For an instant it seemed as though he would smite her, but he flung away, saying, “Get out o’ my sight ! Ye’ve done for your brother !”

Yet, for all his passion, his mind was working

quickly. He recalled her as she tottered through the shop.

“There’s just a chance he hasna opened it yet. Haste ye to his house and tell him ye want a sight o’ it for ten minutes. Make any excuse ye like, but gang quick.”

Willingly she went, poor soul, for with all her being she loved this brother of hers, contemptible thief though he was.

John Corrie lived a hideous age in the ten minutes that followed. Then Rachel returned with the paper in her hand, but everything else about her told him she had failed.

“John,” she said, “I’ll offer him every penny I possess”—she had laid by nearly two thousand pounds—“for the letter.”

As though he had not heard her he passed into the empty, semi-dark shop, and sank on a chair at the counter. He was weak and sick with dread.

She followed, and repeated her suggestion.

“Away!” he cried; “I mun think.”

Reluctantly she left him, and in the kitchen recovered herself sufficiently to set about preparing some strong tea.

An hour passed before he joined her, and started to pace the floor.

"Ye read the letter?" he asked at last, abruptly, in a repressed voice.

She nodded, her mouth quivering.

"Ye ken what it means in the hands o' an enemy—a friend o' Hugh Carstairs' daughter? . . . Jail!"

"Oh, John! . . . But he'll maybe sell it to me."

"Ye fool!"

Presently she said: "Sit down, dearie, and try a cup o' tea. I've made it fresh for ye."

He went on pacing. "And what about Symington?"

"If ye were to tell him the truth, maybe——"

"Ye fool!"

"But I was thinking," she said meekly, "he might help ye for his own sake."

"The only way he can help me is to marry your niece within the three months, getting her promise at once, of course. But——"

"Something maybe happened in the train last night," she ventured. "Ye'll be hearing from him in the morning."

"I wonder," he said slowly, "where she got the money to gang to London wi'."

The woman's hand went to her flat breast.

“ John, did she no’ take it from the post office, as ye said ? ”

“ No,” was the sullen answer.

“ Oh, John, John ! . . . But ye’ve enough to bear now without me reproaching ye.” After a pause she continued : “ She’ll ha’ to send Sam her address afore he can do anything wi’ the letter.”

“ Aye ; but they’re no’ such fools as to communicate wi’ each other through this office.”

She sighed helplessly.

“ There’s somebody in the office,” he said suddenly. “ I’ll——”

“ Let me,” she interposed ; “ ye’re no’ fit. Take your tea till I come back.”

She was absent several minutes, and on her return she was cheered by seeing him at the table and the cup empty.

“ Who was it, and what were ye doing in the shop ? ” he asked, more from habit than interest.

“ It was Mr. Hayward——”

“ Him ! What was he wanting ? ”

“ A notebook, and he was terrible particular about the size. He had a piece o’ paper with the measurements wrote on it.”

“ Ye wouldna find anything fine enough to suit him.”

"But I did. There was one left o' the half-dozen that ye got once for Mr. Symington. He said it was the very thing. . . . Could ye no' eat something?"

He was brooding again, and minutes passed ere he roused himself.

"That postman's got me," he muttered bitterly, "got me as never a man was got before. I'm cornered. He'll hear from the girl to-morrow—they'll ha' planned about writing, ye can be sure—and then he'll get to work wi' the letter. God! I feel like making a bolt for it—but where can a man hide in these days o' wireless telegrams and so forth." All at once he turned on her snarling: "What for did ye interfere wi' my private affairs?"

She winced and shuddered. "The Lord kens I'm sorry," she whimpered. "And He kens I would do anything to help ye now. John, is there anything I can do?"

"Aye," he replied with a dreadful ironic laugh, "ye can burn the cursed letter!"

Gaping, she gazed at him. What did he mean?

"Only, ye would likewise need to burn the postman's house over his head, and that within the next twelve hours." The laugh came again and died into silence.

The woman's face lost its foolish laxness ; she seemed to stiffen all over. And suddenly she screamed—

“ I'll do it. . . . John, I'll do it for your sake ! ”

“ What ? ” he shouted, and started to his feet.

She staggered, recovered, and rushed from the kitchen. When he followed he found that she had locked herself in her own room.

He passed into the dim shop and sat down.

“ Did she mean it ? ” he asked of the shadows. And later—“ Better her than me, for who would ever suspect her ? ”

It was evening when she came out. She went about her accustomed duties, but her countenance was grey and stony, and she was as one stricken dumb. And he, being afraid to ask a certain question and incapable of thinking of aught else, was dumb also. They retired at the usual hour of ten.

CHAPTER X

COLIN'S change of mind with respect to the hundred pounds had taken place within the hour following his proud refusal. The thought of Kitty's position in the event of a scandal was too much for him. Dependent on the Corries, practically a prisoner in Dunford, the sensitive girl would be bound to suffer terribly—and all on account of himself. And so he had gone downstairs, miserable enough, but prepared to tell his father that he would take the money after all, prepared also for humiliation. But, as we know, he was spared the latter. It should be added that he did not for an instant doubt that the notes had been deliberately left on the writing-table. His father was not the man to be careless where money was concerned.

Well, he would send the notes to Kitty in such a way that she could not suspect him. A hundred pounds would give her a certain independence

and power whatever happened ; they would open a way of escape if the need for that became urgent. Colin did not ignore the possibility of her going to London, but he honestly strove to extinguish the hope of meeting her there. Had she not told him frankly that she did not love him, and what was his worldly state that he should dare to dream of any girl as his own ? As an honourable man he must go his own way and endeavour to forget those sweet stolen hours in the woods around Dunford.

It is not to be assumed that Colin arrived in London penniless. To be precise, he possessed the sum of £15 7s. 4d., but whether such a considerable sum gives a young man a better start than the proverbial half-crown may be left open to question. With only thirty pence in his pocket a man dare not pause to pick and choose, and perhaps that is the real secret of the success of the half-crown adventurers—if they ever really existed.

Colin had plenty of acquaintances, not to mention sundry relations in London, but he had no desire to see them in his present circumstances, nor did he imagine they would be rejoiced to see him. Most of us can be quite kind to the failure, but few of us can sincerely sympathize with him,

especially when we conceive him to be a fool as well.

London held but one man whom Colin desired to meet. This was Anthony West, a friend of his earlier student days. West, who was several years the senior, had been a failure, too ; that is to say, he had stuck in the midst of his science course, wriggled for a while between paternal wishes and personal inclination, and been captured finally by the latter. A writer of clever prose trifles and dainty verse, he had plunged into journalism. The friends had not met since then, and their correspondence had gradually ceased. West's last letter had been written two years ago.

To the address on it Colin went on the morning of his arrival. Mr. West, the landlady informed him, had left a long time ago ; she had no other information to give. Colin, after recourse to the Directory, journeyed to a court off Fleet Street, made some inquiries, entered a doorway of grimy and forbidding appearance, ascended three flights of steep and narrow stairs, and tapped at a door that had seen better days. A shout bade him enter, and he advanced into the London office—or part of it—of a provincial evening paper, and the presence of his friend who, bowed and scrib-

bling at a decrepit desk, took no notice of him. A more dismal and dusty little room Colin had never been in. Poor old West had evidently failed again. His heart was sinking fast when the scribbler turned, stared and recognized him.

“Well, this is good!” cried West. “Sit down!” From a broken easy chair he swept a pile of newspapers and a dozen or so books for review. “Here, take a cigarette, and give me ten minutes to finish this.” The scribbling was resumed, with the remark—Greek to Colin: “It’s those dashed Zeniths—started booming again this morning.”

At the end of seven minutes he sat up, rang the bell, and swung round towards his visitor.

“Talk!” he said, wiping his brow with one hand, and tapping a cigarette on the desk with the other.

A boy dashed in, grabbed the scribbled sheets, and fled.

“Do you still write verses?” asked Colin involuntarily.

West exploded with amusement. “So that’s how it strikes you! Yes, I do—not here—but never mind me—what are you doing in London?”

“Nothing,” was the truthful enough answer.

West’s gaze was kindly.

"Go on! Something tells me you are in a hole, and if I can do anything to help——"

"Thanks, Anthony. I see you haven't changed," said Colin gratefully. "I'll tell you all about it, for I need advice badly." And with commendable brevity he gave his friend an outline of his affairs.

After he had ended the other remained silent, a brooding look on his tired, rugged, honest face, for nearly a minute. He spoke abruptly, but gently.

"What do you want to do?"

"Anything."

"H'm! What can you do?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, it can't be so bad as all that, Colin! Do anything in the way of writing nowadays?"

Colin flushed.

"Haven't touched it for a year. You see, I did make an attempt to please the governor."

"And before that?"

"Had a few small things accepted here and there, locally, you know."

Anthony sighed. "I broke forcibly away from the uncongenial myself," he said, "so my sympathy is genuine. But it didn't mean falling into clover. I'm here from seven to twelve six days

get stuck without letting me know. In spite of my groans I've always a bit to spare—at least nearly always." He looked at his watch. "Five minutes yet." For a little while he was gloomily silent, then his face lightened. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a note to a man who is interested, financially and otherwise, in many things. He might find you an opening somewhere. I once was able to do him a small service, and he has a long memory. . . . Let me see! This is Friday, and he doesn't come to the City. Still, I believe he'll see you at his house—say, about four o'clock."

Anthony shook his pen and scribbled a few lines, folded the sheet, and put it in an envelope, which he addressed to—

"John Risk, Esq.,

"83 Aberdare Mansions, W."

Handing over the letter he said: "You may find him cool at first; he is seldom anything else. Coolness seems to run in his family. But whatever you are, be frank with him. Come and see me to-night and report. There's my address. I'll have a chop for you at seven—and a bed if you'll stay. And now"—he held out his hand—"good luck!"



Colin went out with a full heart. What a wonderful thing was friendship?

At four to the minute he presented himself at 83 Aberdare Mansions. He was evidently expected—it was like Anthony to have 'phoned—for the servant on hearing his name conducted him at once to a beautifully appointed study.

The servant placed a chair and retired. The tall man who had risen from the writing-table took West's note, saying courteously, "Be seated, Mr. Hayward." He sat down himself and read the note, then said quietly—

"Mr. West has the right to ask what he will of me, and it appears that you are his worthy friend. Will you be good enough to tell me what you care to tell about yourself, Mr. Hayward?"

It was a less easy matter in the face of this calm, urbane stranger than it had been with Anthony for listener to render a succinct account of himself, but Colin omitted nothing, however unflattering to himself.

Mr. Risk offered no comment, but he asked one or two questions, which seemed to Colin rather idle, and then fell silent and reflective.

Suddenly he said: "Do you trust me?"

With some hesitation, but without the least dubiety Colin answered: "Certainly, Mr. Risk."

“Then I will trust you,” said Risk in his matter-of-fact voice. “I am going to give you a trial,” he went on, “and in the circumstances it is, I admit, a rather curious one. You have, of course, the option of refusing, but if you accept, kindly let it be done on the understanding that you will obey my instructions implicitly. Please understand, also, that the fact of your coming from a place called Dunford, while it forms an odd coincidence, and may be a help, has nothing to do with my choosing you for this particular piece of work. I would have asked you to perform it just the same had you come from the Isle of Man. Well, now”—he paused for a moment—“I have a letter here which I wish to be delivered first thing in the morning to Mr. Alexander Symington, White Farm, Dunford——”

Colin checked words at his very lips.

“A train leaves King’s Cross at 5.45, and though it does not usually stop at Dunford, I have arranged that it shall do so for you shortly after 1 a.m. I hope you may be able to find some sort of shelter until 6, when you will deliver the letter. You will bring back an answer by the first train possible and report to me here. By the way, you are, perhaps, acquainted with Mr. Symington ? ”

“Very slightly.”

“Like him?”

Colin smiled faintly. “Can’t say I do.”

“He is quite unknown to me,” the other proceeded. “I am curious to know, however, just how he looks when he reads this letter, and you must try to manage that for me. Here is the letter. There is no need for me to make a mystery of it—a simple business question.”

The letter was typed on a large sheet bearing the heading “The Zenith Gold Mining Company, Limited,” and ran as follows—

“DEAR SIR,—

“We have your letter of yesterday’s date covering the Certificate (Bearer) for 500 shares, Nos. 23501 to 24600, which you desire to have converted into five certificates for 100 shares each. This is having our attention. Meantime, will you kindly inform us at what date, as nearly as possible, you purchased the shares numbered as above.”

It was signed by the Secretary of the Company.

Colin handed it back, remarking: “It seems a simple enough matter, Mr. Risk.”

"I hope so. Now, are you prepared to go through with it ? "

"Certainly."

"Good ! You are not likely to encounter your friends at so early an hour."

"It doesn't matter if I do. I'm not under a very black cloud, you know."

"Still, you are not keen on the job."

"I'm keen on carrying it through."

Risk nodded as much as to say : "That's the right spirit," and laid a couple of bank-notes on the table.

"For your expenses," he said, and added a few instructions. "Mr. West shall be advised that you are leaving town, so you don't need to trouble about your engagement with him. I'll look for you to-morrow evening."

Realizing that the interview was at an end, Colin rose.

"I'll do my best, Mr. Risk."

"I expect that of you, Mr. Hayward," said the other, ringing the bell.

At the gate of the lift Colin stood aside to allow a lady to emerge. Their eyes met for an instant, and he noticed that hers were unusually luminous and wide-set. Then his mind went back to the business on hand.

“Hullo!” said Mr. Risk as his sister came in. “Hope I didn’t interrupt your muse in its description of some poor wretch’s wedding garments——”

“You did! The only amends you can make is to ring for tea and tell me why you wired for me.”

“To give you tea perhaps,” he said, pressing a button.

“Come, John! What do you want with me?”

“Who is Miss Carstairs?”

Hilda sat up. “She’s a friend of mine——”

“New?”

“Well, she is—but why do you ask?”

“Tell me what you know about her,” he said seriously.

“I’m afraid I can’t, John,” she replied, after a moment. “I’m under promise not to repeat what she told me.”

“That’s a pity. Where did you meet her? Glasgow?”

“No—on the train, last night.”

“Can’t you tell me where she came from?”

“I think I may tell you that much. Dunford is the name of the village.”

“Dear me! Dunford seems to be emigrating to London!”

“What do you mean, John?”

“Nothing for you, Hilda. Did she mention her father?”

“She told me he was dead. He was a journalist. They used to live in Glasgow. I had better not say more.”

“Thanks, you’ve told me all I want to know about Miss Carstairs—for the present. Now what can you tell me about the mysterious Mr. Symington, whose head you instructed me to punch on his calling here?”

“Oh, has he been?” she exclaimed.

“Patience! I may be wrong, but I fancy he is still in Dunford. In fact, I’ve just dispatched a messenger——”

“Nonsense! The man’s in London—or was this morning!”

“Indeed! Why didn’t you say so this morning?” Risk asked without irritation.

“I thought that you would understand that he was—was after us.”

“My dear girl, I don’t wish to belittle your attractions, or Miss Carstairs’, but I wish you had been more explicit at the time. I merely thought that in the course of one of your escapades you had favoured an objectionable person with your brother’s address instead of your own—an ad-

mirable expedient I admit—but I had not thought of the person being on your very heels, as it were.”

“But what do you know of him?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“The Zenith secretary sent me a letter this morning which had come from a Mr. Symington, of Dunford, and now you have strengthened my suspicion induced by the letter that he is also the objectionable person. Of course, there may be another Mr. Symington in Dunford, so I’ll let my messenger go ahead. It will be good training for him anyway—test his discretion and so on. What does Miss Carstairs say about Symington?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Has she mentioned a Mr. Hayward—Colin Hayward?”

“No.”

Just then the servant brought tea. When he had retired, Hilda said—

“John, do tell me what it all means.”

He looked at her gravely. “I don’t know yet. It may all mean nothing of any consequence. On the other hand it may mean something of considerable importance.”

“To you?”

“To your new friend. Now hold your tongue and pour out.”

CHAPTER XI

IN the darkness of the hour preceding dawn, John Corrie, fully dressed, lay on his bed listening. The sound he had been dreading yet yearning for had come at last. His sister was moving in the room above. The atmosphere was sultry, yet the man shivered. Was Rachel about to attempt the deed that might save him, or was she only restlessly repenting of her wild promise? If the former, should he stop her, or let her take her self-appointed course? One question led to another, but none got an answer.

At last he was aware that she was cautiously opening her door. He did not move. He heard her come stealthily down the stair, pausing after every creak. Presently he caught a glimpse of light under his door. It vanished, yet not so suddenly as though a candle had been blown out. She must have turned into the passage leading to the shop. What could she be wanting there at such an hour? He pretended to himself that he could not guess.

After a little while the light returned with her

footsteps. It remained in his vision during the short silence that ensued. The silence ended in a heavy sigh. John Corrie lay very still.

The light went out. He heard her groping her way to the front door. He heard it open—close—softly. She was gone on her dark errand, and he had deliberately let her go. Nothing he could ever do or suffer in this world would redeem his soul from that loathsome disgrace. But John Corrie was not thinking of his soul then.

He sprang up, lit a candle and ran upstairs; thence he peeped from a window. He was in time to see a cloaked figure fade into the misty murk. The cloak bulged at one side. What was she carrying in it concealed? Again he pretended he could not guess. Returning downstairs he pretended also not to feel the strong, rank odour of paraffin, nor to notice the drips on the passage from the shop.

He returned to his bed, but now he kept the candle burning, for he was afraid of the darkness. And ere three minutes had passed, he rose, shaken with a new terror. What if the holder of the letter should, in spite of all, escape with it? . . . For a moment he wavered on the verge of collapse, then the very terror itself stiffened his nerves, cleared his mind, and drove him to action.

In an amazingly short time he was following the path taken by his sister. He wore no cloak, but both his side pockets bulged, and he carried a club-like staff. He sped swiftly through the slumbering village. He was sweating and shivering, and once his whole being leapt as if jerked at the whistle of a distant train. He did not intend to overtake Rachel; she must do her work deeming herself unobserved; yet he did not wish to be far behind her. Clear of the village, he began to trot on the grass at the side of the road.

Years ago a sanguine and enterprising individual had caused to be erected by the roadside, midway between station and village, a superior sort of timber shanty, and had labelled it "Cyclists' Rest—Temperance Refreshments." There were plenty of cyclists in the summer, and numerous pedestrians also, but somehow few of them seemed to be tired or thirsty; and at the end of the second season the sanguine and enterprising individual departed, unseen by human eye, leaving a small selection of aerated waters in the refreshment-room and sundry little debts for lodging and so forth in the village. Eventually the building fell to the only bidder, Sam, the postman, who converted it into two apartments,

and a fairly snug home of which he was inclined to be proud.

A mere strip of garden separated the house from the road, but Sam kept it bright with flowers for eight months of the year. The front of the house was painted a pale stone-colour; the porch, the door, and the two quartets of tall, extremely narrow windows were coloured white. Altogether it provided a gay relief from the sober moorland behind it. Across the road, and separated from it by a deep ditch usually dry in summer, lay a strip of moor gently sloping upwards to the wood, through which a path supplied a short cut from the station to the village. There was no other dwelling within five minutes' walk.

When John Corrie's eyes began dimly to discern the house he slowed his pace till he was stealing forward with every appearance of caution and alertness. Suddenly he stopped short, dropped on hands and knees, and let himself down into the ditch where he crouched, holding his breath.

A vague figure was coming hurriedly from behind the house. On reaching the road it broke into a shambling run, its dark garment flapping like the wings of some huge night bird. As it passed the lurking watcher it panted and sobbed.

Presently it disappeared round a bend, and the watcher heaved a sigh of angry relief. That was the worst of women : they could do nothing without making a fuss !

He drew himself from the ditch, and now his head and most of his face were covered with a heavy black muffler. Keeping to the grass, he darted towards the house. Opposite it, he halted for a moment, almost overcome by the thudding of his heart. Just then he perceived a thin smoke rising from the rear of the house—from the attached shed ; he guessed that contained the postman's store of coal and wood. That nerved him again. It was now or never.

Dropping his bludgeon, he brought from his pocket a hank of thin, strong rope, shook it out and tip-toed across the road. He was about to fasten one end to the door handle with the view to securing it to a pillar of the porch, when he bethought himself of another, though barely possible way. With fearful care he turned the handle—and lo, the door gave ! Chance had favoured him ! Sam had forgotten to lock it—not for the first time.

Sweating, John Corrie opened the door about a foot, put round his hand and removed the key from the lock. Then with infinite gentleness he

drew the door shut, inserted the key, turned it and withdrew it. Almost fainting he recrossed the road, took up his staff, and fell rather than descended into the ditch.

A faint breeze was stirring at last. Smoke blown over the tarred roof of the shanty drifted to his nostrils. For a while, fingering the key, he seemed to hesitate; then, turning, he tossed it from him among the heather. The rope he coiled up and let fall at his feet. He crouched, staring at the house.

And presently a spark floated up, hovered and died. But others followed, thicker and thicker, and a glow appeared under them. Crackling sounds broke the silence, softly, timidly at first, but soon with noisy boldness. The breeze gained in strength. A fiery tongue waved above the roof, subsided, rose again and licked the tarry surface; ere long it was joined by others. A low roaring mingled with the crackling. The narrow windows were still dark, but smoke began to stream from the ventilator over the door. Woe to the sleeper if he did not waken now!

Cold with terror, fascinated by horror, Corrie knelt in his lair and gazed and gazed. Suddenly a light sprang into being in the room on the left—a small light that lasted but a moment. The

sleeper had wakened and struck a match. Corrie wondered if he would wait to light a candle, but in the next moment the windows went dark. Sounds followed: a cry, the noise of a chair overturned, hurried footfalls on a bare plank floor. Then Corrie put his hands under the muffler and thrust his fingers in his ears. For the inmate was trying to open the door.

The flames were now rising high above the roof; smoke was pouring from the ventilator, trickling from under the door and through crevices about the windows and walls. A reddish glow behind the windows on the left caused the watcher to shut his eyes. But he could no longer close his ears to agony, for the prisoner was raining blows with some heavy implement on the door and lock. Once more Corrie was roused to action. What if the holder of the letter should escape with it after all? He readjusted the black muffler about his head till little more than his eyes remained uncovered, took a fresh grip on his staff, and held himself in readiness. The blows became frantic.

* * * * *

Up yonder in the wood, Colin Hayward, fagged with the long railway journey and much thinking, had thrown himself down to await the morning.

He was almost asleep when the sound of knocking made him raise his head from his arms. As he did so he became conscious of a strong smell of burning timber. The sound, coupled with the odour, struck him as odd at that hour. He got up and crossed the few yards which lay between him and the verge of the wood. From there he looked down on fire and smoke, and quickly realized that the burning thing was the abode of his old friend Sam, the postman. He descended the slope as swiftly as the darkness, the treacherous ground, and the slippery heather permitted.

At last the lock was shattered, the door torn inwards. The hatchet fell from Sam's hand as, spent and coughing most grievously, he staggered forth to reel across the road, bare-footed, in a long grey night-shirt. At the grass he stumbled and fell helplessly, in the heaving torment of smoke-charged lungs.

He was beginning to revive, when behind him, rising from hands and knees, John Corrie clubbed him over the head—once—twice—and would have struck again but that there was no need. Sam lay on his face, one hand clutching grass, the other under him, clenched against his breast. With a sob of terror, Corrie threw his cudgel into the ditch and turned his victim over. And now

the back of the house was well ablaze, and in the yellow light even small things became plain. The clenched hand, for instance, held a crushed piece of paper—the little, terrible thing, the recovery of which meant salvation to Corrie. He went down on his knees to prize open the grasping fingers, but they fell apart of their own accord. He took the letter. He gloated over it. The latter proceeding was folly; his moment of exultation was to cost him dear. Hearing dulled by excitement and the thick muffler did not warn him until too late. He scrambled to his feet only to be seized viciously from behind by the collar and shaken like a rat. Then a cruel grip on his wrist caused him to drop the precious letter, and a savage kick sent him five yards beyond it on his face.

“ You beastly coward ! ” cried a voice he knew, and all panic-stricken he picked himself up and fled.

Colin had started to pursue, when a groan from the stricken one recalled him. He picked up the letter, deeming that it must be of importance, stuffed it into his pocket, and proceeded to do what he could for Sam. Perhaps, after all, his student days had not been wholly wasted. But Sam was sore hurt. His home was a fiery furnace, and he neither knew nor cared.

CHAPTER XII

ON the following afternoon Kitty and her new friend were lounging in the latter's sitting-room, one of the four apartments of a little, old-fashioned, top flat in Long Acre. The situation of Miss Risk's home had its drawbacks, but it was a most convenient one for her business, and she had given the house itself a charm and comfort not to be despised.

"But I can't go on being your guest indefinitely," Kitty was saying from her seat at the open window.

Hilda, stretched on the couch, smiled and then yawned. She had had a hard morning's work, and the heat was oppressive.

"You have been here for about thirty hours," she returned in a lazy voice. "Don't say it seems like years."

"Oh, you know what I mean, Miss Risk——"

"I think you might call me by my pretty name."

"I'd like to," said Kitty diffidently, "but——"

"I believe you're afraid of me, Kitty!"

"I'm not really, but——"

"If you say 'but' again, I'll go to sleep! Now listen, Kitty! You have told me a good many things about yourself, so you can no longer argue that I know nothing about you. I know far more about you than you know about me. Isn't that so?"

"Perhaps it is, Miss—Hilda."

"Well, then, if you keep talking about leaving me, the only conclusion I can draw is that you don't like staying with me——"

"Oh, no, no!"

"—or that you are absurdly proud."

Kitty hung her head.

Hilda gave a little nod of understanding.

"Kitty," she said kindly, "won't you trust me and let me protect you? I've never had any one to protect except myself. Come and sit beside me."

The younger girl came slowly over to the couch, faltered, and fell on her knees, crying—

"And no one has ever protected me, or wanted to do it, before."

Hilda took her in her arms—strong shapely arms they were.

“Poor little soul!” she whispered; “can’t you see not only that I want you to stay here, but that for your own safety’s sake you must stay here until, at least, you know something of London, and have found employment and made friends? When all that has happened, you shall be free to choose as you think best, but till then you’re my prisoner, whether you like it or not!”

After a little while Kitty said tremulously, “Don’t be offended, Hilda, but—but if only you would allow me to—to pay my share.”

“Well,” answered Miss Risk in a most business-like tone, assumed mainly to satisfy the other, “we may come to terms later on—if you promise now to be my guest for a month.”

“I never knew there was a girl like you in the world!”

“No more there is!” said Hilda cheerfully.

“I never dreamed I was such a coward till that night——”

“You mislaid your courage—that was all—but you’ll find it again presently, and look here, Kitty! Until my brother finds something for you to do——”

“Oh, is he going to try?”

“John never tries—at least he never seems to; he just does. But never mind about that

now. I was going to say that you can help me a bit, if you feel so disposed."

"How? Tell me quick!"

"You used to type for your father, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes! I must show you the work I did for him. I believe I was fairly smart, but after five years, I'm afraid——"

"You'll knock off the rust in no time. You can work away on my old machine most mornings, and when you feel it coming easy I'll give you plenty of manuscript, my own and other people's, too, if you want it. How's that?"

"All the difference in the world, for it means I shan't be entirely useless. Oh, you have made me so happy!"

"Go on!" laughed Hilda. "I like being cuddled!" But there were tears in her eyes. "Goodness!" she exclaimed next moment, "there's somebody coming up Jacob's Ladder!" —as she designated the steep and narrow wooden staircase leading to the flat. "A man, I should say, from the tread. Shall we flee and tidy ourselves, or simply draw down the sun blind?" She rose and went to the window. "It must be the blind, I'm afraid. Matilda is unusually alert in answering the door to-day. Don't be alarmed,

Kitty. I've no friends who aren't nice, and I want you to meet them all sooner or later. Now let's arrange ourselves at our ease, and hope it may be a particularly nice one to begin with."

Kitty was smiling despite her nervousness when the elderly servant, whom Hilda's brother insisted on her retaining, announced "Mr. West."

It was at once evident to Kitty that he and Hilda were the best of friends. Next moment he was introduced to her, and there was something in his handshake as well as in his eyes that took away half her shyness.

"Miss Carstairs has come from Scotland to spend a little time with me," Hilda said presently, "so you must give her as good an impression of the journalistic life as you can."

"You are not in the trade, I hope, Miss Carstairs?" he said, with a faint smile; then, suddenly—"But pardon me, perhaps you are a friend of Hugh Carstairs, of Glasgow, who wrote so brilliantly some years ago. I met him once in a friend's house just before I came to London."

"He was my father," Kitty said softly, with a flush of pleasure.

"Then you and I shall have at least one big subject in common," he said warmly.

"This is splendid!" said Hilda, smiling.

“Mr. Carstairs was my ideal journalist,” Anthony went on. “I’ve often wondered why he never wrote books. Perhaps he hadn’t the time——”

“Miss Carstairs has just been telling me,” said the hostess, “that she has in her possession several unfinished works of her father’s——”

“Not here ? not in London ? ” he cried eagerly.

“Yes,” said Kitty timidly, “I have them with me. There are several—one a play.”

“Would it be too much,” Anthony began and halted.

“Mr. West means that he would like to read them,” Hilda remarked. “I think you might trust him,” she added, with a glint of amusement. “Really, Anthony, I never saw you so enthusiastic before ! ”

“Wait, Hilda, until I give you some cuttings of Hugh Carstairs’ articles to read. And you, Miss Carstairs, perhaps, when you know me better, you will allow me to look at the unfinished works.”

At this point Matilda brought in tea, and the conversation became less personal. Kitty was well content to listen. She was more than interested. The five years of barren drudgery in Dunford were forgotten. She was living in a

new world, the world of her girlish dreams during the last year of her father's life, the world he had promised he would show her—some day—when his ship came home. . . . And Hilda Risk, guessing what it meant to the girl, kept West talking of people and things in his profession, till with a start he noticed the hour, and rose to go.

Hilda went with him to the door. She had a question to ask.

“Anthony,” she said, “it's not like you to gush. Did you really admire her father's work so much?”

“Honestly, Hilda. Why, the man was a genius, though I'm afraid he didn't make the most of himself. Possibly your brother has not mentioned that he knew Carstairs well.”

“John! He never told me!” she exclaimed.

“As a matter of fact,” he added. “John requested me to call on you this afternoon.”

“Oh!”

“You're not annoyed, Hilda?” he asked rather anxiously.

“Of course not!” she smiled. “And I ought not to be surprised at this time of day at anything John does. I suppose he wanted your impression of Kitty?”

“I think he wanted to be made absolutely certain that she is the daughter of Hugh Carstairs. I was not to make any other inquiries of her. But, as you know, there isn't much profit in asking John his reasons.”

“I do know—and we'll leave it at that. And I'll not ask you what you think of Kitty—yet. Come soon again and make her better acquaintance. She is very sweet, and she will be bright, too, once she gets a chance. . . . Working as hard as ever, I suppose?” she said, as he took her hand for a moment.

He smiled a little sadly. “Will you allow me to take you and Miss Carstairs to the theatre one night soon?” he said.

“Thank you; that will be a treat for us both, Anthony.”

“I'd like to introduce a friend of mine who has just turned up in London—Colin Hayward. Your brother——”

“Why, John mentioned him yesterday!”

“Then may I bring him?”

“Surely.”

“Till then, good-bye.”

Hilda returned to the sitting-room to find a new Kitty, all delight and eagerness.

“Please tell me what he writes?” she asked,

almost sure that Mr. West was her friend's lover.

"He writes beautiful things that don't sell," Hilda replied a trifle bitterly, "and he makes a poor but decent living from a wretched provincial paper. And," she continued with a change of tone, "there isn't a better man on this earth—nor a prouder. I'm telling you this, Kitty, because you are likely to meet him pretty often. He has refused a post worth £1,500 a year offered him by my brother."

"Oh, why?"

"Because at Cromer, four years ago, he saved me from drowning, and he refuses to be paid for that. There's pride for you!"

"Isn't it more than pride?" Kitty softly ventured.

Miss Risk passed to the window and drew up the blind, remarking: "He is going to take us to the theatre one night soon."

Kitty clasped her hands in rapture. "I seem to have come into Heaven!"

The other laughed. "By the way, he has a great friend who hails from your part of the world, Kitty. Mr. Colin Hayward——"

"Oh!" cried Kitty.

"You know him?"

"Yes."

"Not another villain, I hope?"

"Oh, no."

"You would not mind if Mr. West brought him here?"

"Indeed, no," said Kitty, angry with herself for blushing. It was so silly, especially as she was not in love with Colin.

Hilda did not pursue the subject. Their friendship, she felt, was still far too new for the taking of liberties, however kindly. After a pause—

"Have you decided," she inquired, "about letting your aunt know your address? I wish I could advise you, but I simply don't know what to say about it."

Kitty sighed. "I think I'll wait for another day. If I could only let her know without my uncle learning it."

"He can't hurt you now."

"I wonder," murmured Kitty, with another sigh.

"Oh, this won't do! Mustn't get into the dumps again! Leave it till to-morrow, as you say. How do you feel about a walk before dinner?"

"I'd love it! And please, Hilda?"

"Go on, Kitty."

“Will you—will you help me to buy some decent clothes?”

“Hooray!” cried Miss Risk, “that’s the proper spirit!”

Matilda came in with a telegram for her mistress.

“Reply paid, Miss,” she said retiring; “boy’s waiting.”

Hilda read the following:—

“Has your guest any recollection of hearing her father use the word zenith not in an astronomical sense?—JOHN.”

“My brother asks an extraordinary question,” said Hilda, and handed the message to Kitty.

Kitty gazed at it, frowned and shook her head. Then—“Oh, wait! The answer to the question is ‘No,’ but once, quite recently, I heard my uncle speak of Zeniths—not zenith. But why should Mr. Risk——”

“Don’t ask me! I’ll just reply, ‘Not father but uncle,’” said Hilda, going to the writing-table.

And just then Matilda came in with another telegram.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Hilda, and with her pencil slit it open. Her gay expression faded

out. She paled slightly, muttering, "Another matter," and tore it into little pieces. Then she went on with writing the reply.

The torn telegram, which had been "handed in" at the same hour as its precursor, was also from her brother. It said—"Take very good care of your guest. No going out alone. But don't alarm her."

CHAPTER XIII

JOHAN CORRIE was now fairly in the net. He reached his cottage in a condition verging on collapse, physical and mental, and slinking round to the back, gained admittance by the window of his own room, from which he had emerged an age, as it seemed, ago. He stood listening. . . . Not a sound. What was his sister doing? He must see her at once—not to tell her anything, but to discover whether she had learned of his having been out of doors.

But first he must remove traces of the outing. Having lit the candle, he got off his boots, and the black muffler. They must be got rid of. In stocking feet he stole to the shop, and there made a parcel which he laid on a high shelf behind a row of tomato tins. In another part of the shop he hid his jacket in similar fashion. And then a most sickening thought struck him and almost wrecked his fear-tossed mind. The staff—Almighty! what on earth had made him fling

it in the ditch? Sooner or later a search would be made; might even be going on now! Presently, his mouth craving water, he went unsteadily, spilling candle-grease by the way, to the kitchen.

And there he found his sister, in a heap on the floor. She was inert, but fully conscious. Somehow he managed to drag her up and place her in the arm-chair by the cold hearth. Then he got water, and gave her some, took a draught himself, and sat down by the table. On a sudden inspiration he blew out the candle. A wakeful, curious person might wonder to see a light at such an hour. Besides . . .

For perhaps twenty minutes the two wretched beings sat huddled in their chairs, motionless, speechless, while a feeble greyness began to filter slowly through the darkness. Then the woman spoke, neither to the man nor herself, but as to a third person, invisible, somewhere in the shadows.

“I hope he died quick. . . . I hope he didna feel the fire. . . . I did it for my brother’s sake. I promised mother I would look after him.”

Corrie rose and sat down again. He was not going to tell her that Sam had escaped the flames.

There was another silence, and through it came the sound of a person running on the dry road.

Presently the sound gave place to that of knocking, then cries—shouts—more knocking—then running again—several persons—cries and shouts once more. . . .

Through the greyness the man and woman peered at each other's pallid countenances. And she was thinking of a little brother she had tended long, long ago ; and he was thinking of a club-like staff lying in a ditch. The scattered noises from the village grew to a commotion. Corrie dropped forward, his elbows on his knees, his face between his hands.

Suddenly the woman got up and came over to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder, and said with a strange tenderness—

“Dinna be feared, John. Ye're safe. The letter's bound to be ashes by now.”

Then she shrieked, for the room was lit by a blinding flash, and she fell to her knees. Almost immediately the house shook under an appalling crash. The long threatened storm had burst at last.

There was a pause as though to allow Earth to take one long breath before the storm and deluge—which were to prove memorable in Dunford and district.

Not many minutes had passed when something

like hope came to John Corrie. Unless the staff were already discovered, he was safe so far as it was concerned, for now the ditch would be rushing a foot deep. His wits began to work again. Even if young Hayward had picked up the letter. . . .

He drew Rachel to her feet, saying shortly but not harshly : " Get to your bed, woman. I'm for out."

" Out ! " she echoed faintly. " Would ye face the wrath o' God ? "

" I would face the folk, in case they wonder. Besides, ye canna be sure that—that he's burnt wi' the house."

" Oh, God ! " she whispered ; and a moment later—" John, bring me word he's alive, and I'll take oath it was me that stole the Zeniths ! " She moved gropingly from the room.

So Corrie, having put on his Sunday boots and oilskins, went out into the storm to face his fellows. He did not encounter his poor victim, who was already on the way, in a summer visitor's motor-car, to the nearest hospital, twenty miles distant ; but he heard talk of concussion of the brain and a villainous-looking tramp seen in the village the previous night ; also he beheld the ruins of the shanty and the brimming ditch.

But for something white on the sodden grass he looked in vain ; and young Hayward, it seemed, had disappeared after doing what he could for the postman.

It was nearing four when Corrie returned home. The storm had ceased, though fine rain still fell on torn-up roads, ruined crops and flooded meadows. He told Rachel exactly what he had heard, and added a little more.

“ He was found by young Hayward. Supposing he had the letter in his hand when he was struck, where is it now ? ”

She was too exhausted by the revulsion, too thankful, to think it out.

“ If you’re in danger, John, I’ll take the blame,” she faltered. “ We’ll hope the letter was burned.”

“ But if it’s not burned, what about Symington ? ”

“ He mun give back the shares.”

“ Ye talk foolishness, Rachel ! ”

“ I’m wearied. I canna grasp aught except that I didna commit black murder. Let me be till the morning.”

Afraid to say more lest he should betray himself, he let her go.

At eight o’clock, the moment the wire was open, he sent a telegram to Symington—

“Come at once.”

About eleven, Symington's housekeeper, purchasing provisions, mentioned in the course of her chatter on last night's affair—the sole topic of conversation in Dunford—that young Mr. Hayward had called to see her employer at six o'clock that morning.

“What was he wanting at such an hour?” Corrie managed to say.

“He didna name his business, but he took a note o' the address in London.”

This added to Corrie's uneasiness, though he could conceive of no connexion between the early call and the letter.

About an hour later, a customer casually referred to his having observed young Hayward enter the morning train for the South, at Kenny Junction. At that Corrie wellnigh gave up. All morning he had hoped against hope that Hayward would return the letter to its owner—himself. Now he was forced to face two dreadful possibilities: first, that Hayward had recognized him last night; secondly, that Hayward knew Kitty's address in London. And before long he perceived a third: namely, that Symington, elated by the enormous rise in Zeniths, might have been talking openly about his shares. Corrie felt

like making a bolt for it. Vain to imagine mercy from Kitty after all that had passed ! Only the idea that Hayward's recognition would be a difficult thing to substantiate and the thought of his sister's promise restrained and sustained him.

He called Rachel into the post office at a moment when no business was doing. They had scarcely spoken since three o'clock.

"Do ye stand by what ye said about the—the shares ?" he asked her, not without shame.

"Aye ; I've promised," she answered dully.

"They'd be easier on a woman than a man," he observed, looking away.

"It doesna matter." She turned to go back to the shop.

"Symington'll be here to-night," he pursued. "There ought to ha' been a letter from him this morning, so I wired him. Maybe we'll manage to put everything right yet. I wish we had your niece's address."

She faced him. "If I had it, I wouldna tell ye," she said quietly. "It'll be enough if I ha' to sacrifice myself. Speak no more to me about this business, John Corrie, for I ha' nothing more to say. Only terrible thoughts." And with that she left him.

CHAPTER XIV

COLIN HAYWARD began the journey south with much to wonder about. He had obtained no light whatever on the extraordinary affair in front of the burning house, for Sam had not recovered consciousness. It was, indeed, doubtful whether he would ever do so. Colin had not the slightest suspicion as to the identity of the muffled coward whom he had seen fell the half-suffocated postman; he had not, owing to position, observed the former take anything from the latter's helpless hand; neither had he in his rage noticed the crushed letter fall. It was in his path as he turned to the victim's succour, and he had picked it up almost automatically, with some vague notion that it might be of consequence to somebody or other.

Then he had forgotten about it.

Now—an hour after leaving the junction—having exhausted the contents of his cigarette-case, he put his hand into a pocket for a reserve

packet, and encountered the document. He merely glanced at its heading, intending to place it in his letter-case for attention later. He had no intention of reading it through. Enough to learn to whom it belonged. But the words "My dear Corrie" arrested both hand and eye. Presently he told himself that there was nothing so very strange in this; the letter might easily have been dropped and left lying there hours before the ghastly affair took place. He noticed the date was of more than five years back. But in the same moment he was caught by the words "Kitty" and "Zeniths"—and "5,000 shares."

"I'm afraid," he said to himself, "I've got to read this whether I like it or not."

It was a longish letter, written in a clear small hand on both sides of a large square sheet. The portion with which we are concerned was as follows :—

"You may perhaps find nothing in the enclosed share certificates (which, please note, are 'bearer') but a fresh evidence of my folly in worldly matters. Still, the Zenith Gold Mine is the only thing of the kind I ever put hard-earned money into. There are 5,000 £1 shares, and I paid 2s. apiece for them, and at the moment they are unsaleable. I acted on the advice of a friend

who had seen the property, and who had knowledge of such things. He was convinced that the mine would come right in time—meaning years—and pay big dividends. Well, he may have been all wrong, and I the silliest of poor fools; but now, John, I put the shares in your keeping as a ‘possibility’ for Kitty, when she comes of age. I have never mentioned them to her—certainly not with any reference to herself—for I don’t want her to be more disappointed in me than I can help. Give them to her when she is twenty-one, and show her this letter, and if by any chance they are worth money then, or later, she will at least repay you what she may have cost you—though, of course, I am hoping she will earn enough to do that as she goes along.

N.B. Should you hear of the shares rising before then, you will just use your discretion, and do the best you can for my girl.”

Colin’s delight at the thought of Kitty having a fortune of her own was soon swamped by a flood of doubts and suspicions. The remainder of the journey was a sort of nightmare. Of only one thing could he assure himself as he neared London: Kitty’s fortune, were it in danger from persons in London or Dunford, was not going to

be made an easier prey by any act of his. At first he had thought of showing the letter to Mr. Risk and asking his advice, but now he determined that his only course was to return to Dunford at the earliest possible moment, and put it into the hands of Kitty herself. He might be losing the chance of his life by such an action, and Mr. Risk might be the best and straightest of men, but Colin was so truly in love with the girl that the hopelessness of it made no difference. Consequently nothing but her happiness mattered.

It was about five o'clock when he reached Aberdare Mansions. He was admitted without delay to his employer's study. Before he could speak, Mr. Risk, with a smile, said—

“Sorry I gave you that vain journey, Hayward. This morning a note from Symington came to the office requesting that the new certificates should be delivered to him at the Kingsway *Grand Hotel*.”

“Yes ; that's the address his housekeeper gave me, Mr. Risk,” said Colin. “Do you wish me to take the letter there now ?” he inquired producing it.

Risk took it and laid it on the writing-table, saying : “About noon I sent the secretary to the hotel with a similar letter, and he found that

Mr. Symington had left for Scotland about two hours previously—presumably in response to a wire which the secretary was able to learn he had received.”

“Gone back to Dunford?”

“We must not assume that. Take a cigarette, Hayward, and, if agreeable to you, tell me in a few words what you know of Mr. Symington.”

“Very little, Mr. Risk, and any information I have is indirect. His father and his two brothers all died within a year, and about eighteen months ago he became the owner of what we call the White Farm—a very decent little place until he got possession. He’s not interested in farming, you know. I’ve heard he has done all sorts of things—some pretty queer—in his time. He has the reputation of being a gambler, and a speculator, but please remember that I’m repeating gossip. I”—Colin hesitated—“I really know nothing against the man.”

Risk, offering a lighted match, said quietly: “Well, what do you know in his favour?”

Colin smiled. “One is more likely to hear of a man’s faults than his virtues. Besides, as I told you, I’ve been more away from Dunford than in it during the last five years or so.”

“You are not familiar with the natives?”

“Not generally speaking. Still, I hope I have a friend or two among them.”

“Would Mr. Symington have been welcome in your home?”

“His father would have been courteously received.”

Risk nodded thoughtfully. “Please pardon so many questions, Hayward. I feel that I may now tell you why I am taking so much trouble, and giving you so much, over this Mr. Symington. About seven years ago I advised a friend who had come into a little money to put it into Zeniths for what is sometimes termed a ‘long shot.’ I did so not only because I positively knew the mines had a great future, though possibly a distant one, but also because I knew my friend would otherwise fritter away the money which he honestly believed he could save for his daughter, then a young girl. . . . Yes, Hayward? Have you something to say?”

“Please go on,” said Colin, restraining himself.

“Very well. Zeniths at that period,” the other proceeded, “were decidedly out of favour. One could buy at two or three shillings. My friend bought 5,000 at half a crown a share. At his request I did the business for him and eventually handed him ten bearer certificates for 500 shares

each. I am a methodical person in some respects, and in an old diary I have a record of the transaction and the numbers of the shares. Now—one moment, please!—I had my friend's promise that he would not part with the shares until I gave him the word. If he needed money badly, he was to let me know. Time passed, and circumstances prevented our meeting; I was much abroad. I did not hear of his death until a year afterwards, and I failed to trace his daughter. But I have always been on the watch for shares bearing the numbers recorded in the old diary, and I have not grown less keen since the shares began to move up in earnest. And now, when the shares have risen to over four pounds apiece—when my friend, had he lived, would have seen himself worth at least twenty thousand pounds—along comes a letter from a Mr. Symington covering five hundred of those same shares——”

“Mr. Risk, I have something to say——”

“One moment more!—and within a few hours of its receipt I discover, by the merest chance, the daughter of my old friend——”

“Her—his name was Carstairs—Hugh Carstairs?” exploded Colin.

“It was.”

“And no doubt you mean as well by the

daughter as you meant by the father?—Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Risk!”

For an instant Risk frowned, then he smiled pleasantly. “The daughter has never seen me, but she has no better friend for her father’s sake. Yet I must try to satisfy you that I am not interested in those 5,000 shares with an eye to personal profit.” He got up and, leaving Colin hot and uncomfortable, went to a safe built into the wall behind the panelling, a door in which stood open. He came back with a thin bundle of parchment-like papers which he put into the young man’s hand.

“Kindly look at these, Hayward, and tell me what they represent.”

Reluctantly but perforce Colin examined the documents and after a little while replied a trifle huskily—

“Eighty thousand shares in the Zenith Company—and you are the owner!”

“Well, does that satisfy you that I can afford to be honest? Please don’t think I was showing off!”

Colin hung his head as he handed back the certificates—and murmured an apology. He was not so much impressed by the man’s great wealth as by his cool, straightforward answer to suspicion.

“ You are evidently Miss Carstairs’ good friend,” Risk said kindly, throwing the bundle on the table, “ and so your doubts do you credit. You are aware that she is in London ? ”

Colin jumped. Well, she had not been long in making use of the hundred pounds ! “ I didn’t know,” he managed to say fairly steadily, and could have asked many questions.

“ She is staying with my sister,” continued Risk. “ My sister was here a few minutes ago. Sorry you did not meet. If you like, we shall call upon her after dinner. But now as to Symington, I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to make another night journey ; only you need not start till 11.30, when you will find a sleeping berth on the train. Am I working you too hard ? ”

“ Rather not ! ” cried Colin. “ But, Mr. Risk, I must not delay another moment to show you this.” He produced the crumpled letter. “ When you have read it, I will answer any questions I can.”

Risk took the letter and started slightly.

“ Hugh’s writing ! ” he murmured. He read carefully and without apparent emotion. Having come to the end, he sighed and said softly : “ Just tell me all you can, Hayward.”

Colin made a brief and simple relation of his

experience beside the burning house. He also told what he knew of the Corries. His host heard him out in silence—and thereafter remained in thought for a space.

Then he said : “ You have raised a lot of questions, Hayward, but I must try to put them in order before I ask them. Certainly we shall have enough to talk about this evening, and I’m afraid we must postpone the call upon my sister. In any case I don’t think we ought to bring Miss Carstairs into the business before we cannot avoid doing so. I have learned that she has no knowledge of the purchase of Zeniths by her father. It would be a pity to excite or alarm her unnecessarily. At the same time, this letter of Corrie’s in itself proves nothing against the man. I am not in Miss Carstairs’ confidence, and my sister has not felt at liberty so far to tell me what the girl has confided to her ; but I can’t help suspecting, after what you have told me, that Miss Carstairs was not particularly happy in Dunford, and that she may possibly have run away.”

“ I shouldn’t wonder,” said Colin almost inaudibly.

“ Only,” continued the other, “ I am loth to believe that she had so little common sense to attempt London with nothing in her purse and

no friends in view—for you have given me to understand that such was her position. Isn't that so?" he asked, with a keen glance at his guest.

Colin felt himself reddening.

"Look here," Risk said pleasantly, "won't you help me by being open with me? I'm the older man, and I've been pretty frank with you. The fuller the confidence between us, the better we shall work together. Now I do not doubt for a moment that you were honestly surprised to hear of Miss Carstairs being in London——"

"So soon," added Colin, before he could prevent himself.

"You mean?"

"Mr. Risk," cried the young man, half-angry, half-amused, "you would get the truth out of any one! Well, I'll trust you; but she must never know." And he confessed to sending Kitty the hundred pounds.

"And how much had you for your own needs when you arrived in London?" was the first question from Risk.

"Fifteen odds. But, you know, I couldn't have taken the money for myself."

The host's smile was kindly. "I doubt whether you are going to be a great worldly success,

Hayward," he said, " but I'm sure you are on the right road to happiness."

Colin gave his head a rueful shake. " Please understand," he said shyly, " that there's nothing between Miss Carstairs and me except a little ordinary friendship."

" Thank you for telling me about the money," said Risk, in a more business-like tone. " Now as to this letter, what is your suggestion ? "

" That you keep it—in your safe—for the present, Mr. Risk."

A slight frown contracted the older man's brow. " It is a horrible thing," he remarked, " to be retaining another man's property, and yet I think the circumstances will excuse, though I still hope they may not justify, the action. You see, if Mr. Corrie is innocent, we are doing him a great wrong ; if he is guilty—well, we are depriving him of a rope to hang himself with. On the whole, I think you ought to call on him to-morrow morning and hand him back the letter—which I shall keep until it is time for you to start."

" Great Heavens ! " exclaimed Colin, aghast.

" And you need not trouble about Mr. Symington for the present. Let us assume them both innocent until we can prove them guilty."

" But Kit—Miss Carstairs' fortune ! "

“Say the word, and I will hand over to you 5,000 of my own shares to hold until you are satisfied that I am dealing fairly with her interests.”

Colin said nothing.

“I had hoped you were going to trust me,” the other murmured.

“Mr. Risk,” cried the young man distractedly, “put yourself in my place! What would you do?”

“I’d at least think over it,” Risk replied cheerfully. “I’ll give you half an hour. I have an engagement now—with a photographer, of all people—and I’m sure you would like a bath and a change of linen after those journeyings. My man will look after you.” He pressed a bell-button on the table. “And while you are thinking over it, please keep remembering this: that there is only one right way of doing a thing—which is my way!” He laughed and extended his hand. Then he became grave. “Hugh Carstairs once rendered a great service to my mother when she was abroad and alone. He is dead, but I remember always. And if any man tries to rob Hugh Carstairs’ daughter, and cheat Hugh in his grave—then God help that man! He shall not escape me!”

The servant opened the door and stood at attention. Knowing not what to think, Colin rose and passed out.

* * * * *

At the same hour Hilda Risk was ascending to her flat in Long Acre. On the second landing she came to an abrupt stop. She had walked from her brother's home, intending to make a purchase on the way—and had forgotten all about it. "Trying to think of too many things at once," she reprimanded herself, and retraced her steps.

As she emerged upon the street she almost collided with a man apparently about to enter. He drew back with a muttered apology, and she passed on her way with a vague feeling of having seen him before. He had a sharp, rather pinched countenance, small dark moustache, and his bowler hat was decidedly shabby. So much she noticed. Then she dismissed the matter, proceeded on her errand, returned home to find Kitty happy at the typewriter, but happier still to see her, and settled down to some journalistic work which was to keep her busy most of the evening. As for the man, he made for Covent Garden telegraph office.

In the middle of the night, being wakeful, she had an odd recollection of the pinched face under

the shabby bowler. And now she remembered where she had seen the man before. Why, only half an hour had elapsed between the first and second encounter ! For she had noticed him on the opposite pavement as she was leaving Aberdare Mansions.

“ The beast followed me ! ” she thought suddenly.

CHAPTER XV

“**Y**OU bungler !”

Mr. Symington's countenance was sickly; his voice was full of cold and bitter disgust.

The wretched Corrie had come to the end of his sorry confession, not without interruptions, mainly of an angry, abusive nature. And now the verdict—“ You bungler !” Somehow it stung most of all.

“ It's easy to call names,” he rejoined resentfully. “ I'm no' the only bungler. If ever a man let a girl slip through his fingers it was you. Ye should ha' had her easy that night—while she was terrified—after she had taken the post office money——”

“ I don't believe she took any money——”

“ Then how could she pay her fare to London ? ”

“ Probably the postman lent—gave—her it.”

The postmaster forced a grin. “ Well, ye can

believe that if ye like. And then," he went on quickly, "ye had your chance in the train—and lost it!"

"I've told you why."

"Well, if ye had got the girl, the letter wouldna ha' mattered so much, for ye would ha' got the Zeniths wi' her. So ye can blame yourself as well as me."

There was a silence. Corrie sat glowering at the floor and plucking at his lower lip. Symington scowled openly at him. They were in the privacy of the parlour. It was about nine o'clock, and growing dark.

Suddenly Symington emitted a short, ugly laugh. "So this is what you brought me back from London for! Well, I don't wonder at your being afraid. Between embezzlement and attempted murder——"

"Whisht, man, for God's sake!"

"It may be murder itself yet——"

"Be quiet, damn ye!"

"Look here, Corrie; what'll you do if Sam recovers?"

"He canna recover—I heard it an hour before ye arrived. But supposing he does recover, what can he do without the letter?"

"You're perfectly sure he didn't spot you?"

“Aye ; I’m sure—and I’m almost sure young Hayward didna’ recognize me.”

“Otherwise you wouldna be sitting here now—eh ? ”

“Let that pass,” said Corrie, restraining his temper. “The point is—the letter.”

“But I don’t happen to be interested in the letter.”

“Ye’ve got to be interested in it ! If I canna get back the letter, I’ll need to get back the shares.”

“I’m afraid you won’t get back the shares.”

Corrie exploded. “Would ye ruin me—send me to the jail ? ”

Symington ignored the outburst. “I bought the shares from you,” he said calmly, “and paid for them. I have your acknowledgment. I may say that I intend to hold them till September, when a first dividend will be declared, which, I am informed, will send them to ten pounds——”

“Ten pound ! Fifty thousand for the lot ! ” gasped Corrie.

“Just so. But rather than risk being involved in your dirty affairs, I’ll sell the lot to-morrow for what I can get and—er—emigrate.”

“Ye swine !—but ye’ll ha’ the police after ye ! ”

“Why ? ”

Corrie rose, sat down again, and writhed in his impotence.

“I might have the lawyers after me,” Symington admitted easily, “but the lawyers always take a—— of a time to get to work, and I generally travel quickly. However, I think you’re making too much of your own danger. Kitty is not likely to attempt to prosecute you, since you can prove that she tampered with the post office money.” He peered through the dusk at the other’s face. “Isn’t that so?”

“Aye, that’s so,” Corrie managed to reply. He was caught in the toils of his own making.

After a little while Symington said: “Why don’t you make Kitty come back here?”

Corrie started, then dropped his gaze. “How can I do that when I dinna ken where she is?”

Symington took out the telegram he had found on his arrival.

“Is that her address?” cried the other.

“It may be. It is certainly the address of the lady who took charge of her on the train, and now that I’ve got it, I’ll soon find where Kitty is.”

“How did ye get it?”

“Never mind. But it might be worth your while to send a wire, first thing in the morning,

to Kitty, at this address. Just say: 'Serious for you if not home within twenty-four hours' . . . How's that?"

Corrie groaned. "She wouldna come. . . . Maybe she's seen the letter by this time."

"Maybe she hasn't. It's a chance anyway—your only chance, perhaps. Will you wire—put it stronger if you like—in the morning?"

"I—I tell ye, she wouldna come."

Symington got to his feet. "I believe," he said slowly, "it was a filthy lie about the post office money."

Corrie shrank in his chair. He was at the end of his endurance. "I did it," he stammered "to help you."

"Did what?"

"P—put the five-pun' note in her drawer."

"God damn you!" cried Symington, raising his fist. "You did it to help yourself to half the——" He stopped short with a stifled curse.

Miss Corrie came in with a lighted lamp, which she set on the table.

"Are ye quarrelling?" she quavered. She seemed to have grown ten years older during the past forty-eight hours.

Symington strode by her, but halted in the doorway.

"I'm going back to London to-morrow," he said harshly, "and I don't want any more wires from you." Thereupon he went out.

Rachel turned to her brother.

"John, John," she cried piteously, "will he no' help ye?"

The unhappy man threw out his arms, let them fall on the edge of the table and bowed his face on them. Helplessly his sister regarded him, then turned and left him to himself. She went to her room and fell on her knees. Had Kitty appeared in that hour, one may presume that she would have been offered the miserable confession of a miserable sinner. But there is an old saying concerning the devil when he was sick. . . .

* * * * *

Shortly after eight the following morning, Colin, carrying a light overcoat and a small suitcase, entered the post office. The dingy place was flooded with sunlight; even the passage to the shop was filled with it. The counter was unattended. Upon it Colin laid the suitcase and coat. Raising the lid he disclosed among sundry articles pertaining to a lengthy night journey a little box camera. For a moment or two he fingered it somewhat nervously. Then

at the back—i.e., the bottom—of the case he drew aside a strip of leather, uncovering a small round hole against which he fitted the eye of the camera. He let down the lid so far: it was kept from closing by his left hand which remained inside. Presently, drawing a long breath, he rapped smartly on the counter.

Almost immediately Miss Corrie appeared in the short passage. At the sight of him she seemed to stumble, and as she recovered herself he said—

“Can I see Mr. Corrie for a moment?”

Without answering she turned and went back. It seemed many minutes before Corrie himself appeared. Colin thought he had never seen a more ghastly-looking creature. The countenance was unreadable, but the man's soul was torn between terror and hope.

As he stepped into the office there was a scarcely audible click from the suit-case.

“Morning,” he said huskily, and ran his tongue over his lips.

“Morning, Mr. Corrie,” replied Colin, fairly cheerfully. He raised the lid and brought forth a sealed envelope without superscription. He handed it over the counter, saying, “You might look and see if the paper enclosed belongs to you.”

Corrie took it with shaking fingers and moved back from the counter. He cleared his throat.

“Ye mean me to open it, Mr. Hayward?”

“Certainly,” Colin could have pitied the man as he turned a second film silently into position.

The envelope was very firmly gummed, and Corrie’s fingers fumbled in a fashion painful to witness. But at last it was torn open—the precious letter was in his hand. He looked as if he were going to cry. Now the click might have been ten times louder without his hearing it. He was dazed with relief.

Colin closed the case, feeling almost guilty.

“Is it yours, Mr. Corrie?”

Corrie seemed to pull himself together. “Aye, it’s mine, sure enough, and—and I’m obliged to ye, Mr. Hayward.” The old cunning came to his aid. “I lost it more’n a week ago. Might I ask where ye found it?”

“On the grass across the road from the postman’s house, while it was burning,” answered Colin, as naturally as he could.

“Well, well! That’s mysterious, for it’s more’n a month since I was that road, except the morning after the fire. Somebody mun ha’ found it and lost it again. Well, once more, I’m obliged

to ye, though the paper's no' o' any great consequence. It was written by my poor brother-in-law when he wasna quite right in his head. Still, I'm glad to have it, Mr. Hayward, thank ye."

"I should explain," said Colin, concealing with an effort his disgust, "that after I picked it up I forgot about it until I was in the train for London. Good morning, Mr. Corrie." He caught up case and coat, and hurried out before Corrie could frame another sentence.

"Rachel!—here, quick!"

She came in haste, almost weeping.

"Oh, John, John, ha' ye got it back?"

"Aye," he answered shortly, with something of his old truculence of tone.

"Oh, God be thanked!" she murmured.

"Ye'll ha' to manage by yourself for an hour," he said rapidly, "I mun hurry to White Farm —"

"But now, John, ye'll tell Kitty the truth," she cried excitedly. "I got her address this morning. I can trust ye wi' it now, for ye're a changed man, as I'm a changed woman——"

"What's the address?"

"366 Long Acre, London—care o' Miss Risk."

"I'll mind it. Well, I mun run, or I'll miss

Symington. I'll master him yet—aye, I will that, by God!”

“But ye—ye'll tell Kitty the truth, John—ye'll write to her this very day—will ye no'?” she caught his arm.

“Pah!” he shook her off. “Let me gang, woman! Well, well, I'll see, I'll see.”

Alone—“God!” she whispered, “is he no' a changed man after all?”

Symington was at breakfast when Corrie broke in upon him.

“What the devil do you want?” was the spurious farmer's greeting.

“I've got back the letter?”

“Sit down and don't make a scene,” said Symington, after a moment. “Tell me about it quietly. And look here, Corrie; I was a bit rough on you last night——”

“Ye were that! But now it's my turn——”

“One moment. I had good cause for my annoyance—you must admit that much. But after I left you, I thought it over in cold blood, and came to the only conclusion possible. You and I must continue to work together; we must stick to the original bargain——”

“Ye'll mean that ye'll try to marry her yet and pay me half the profits——”

“Exactly ! Now tell me about the letter.”

Under this coolness Corrie’s violence collapsed. He seated himself, saying : “ But can I trust ye to keep a’ I said last night secret ? ”

“ We have got to trust each other, Corrie. Let us forget about last night. . . . Now go ahead.”

By the end of the postmaster’s brief recital Symington’s brows were contracted.

“ It’s a puzzler,” he remarked. “ I should say that Hayward returned the letter for one of two reasons : either he hadn’t read it through, or else he wants to stand well with you on account of Kitty. What do you think ? ”

Corrie shook his head. “ I don’t know what to think, but ’twill do neither of us good if he comes across her in London——”

“ How do you know he’s going back there ? ”

“ I canna’ say for certain, but I’ve heard o’ talk among the servants that there was trouble with his father the other night.”

“ Possible,” Symington grinned and became grave. “ Then what’s he doing back here ? ”

“ Ye beat me there. But if ye want advice, it’s just this : get a hold o’ the girl without delay. That’s the only way now to make absolute sure

o' the Zeniths. I can give ye her address for certain."

"Well, I'm hanged!"

"My sister got it this morning. Write it down, will ye?"

"It's just as I thought," said Symington, a moment later, "but I'm obliged to you, Corrie. And, as you say, it's the only way to make sure of the Zeniths without risking trouble. I'll go south to-night."

"How are ye going to get a hold o' her? Ye've got to mind she's wi' friends—at least I suppose so."

"You can leave that to me. Kitty won't escape me a third time! I wonder if she's much in love with that fellow Hayward. Well, if she is, I'll make use of the fact."

"I'd give something to ha' him out o' the road," said Corrie, with sudden viciousness. "I've been thinkin' he maybe kens more'n he's shown. If Sam was to get better after a'——"

"Don't start brooding on that!" said Symington shortly. "By the way, have you destroyed the letter?"

"No, I'm going to keep it—safely this time."

"Why on earth——"

Corrie glared at his fellow-conspirator. "I

intend to trust ye, Symington," he said slowly. "Same time, I warn ye, if ye try to get the better o' me, I'll take the risk o' handing the letter to Kitty Carstairs and telling her the whole cursed story."

For an instant Symington's gaze was murderous. Then he laughed. "Canny man, canny man!" he sneered. "If Kitty would forgive you—well, let that pass. Meantime, I want the loan of twenty pounds. There ought to have been a registered letter for me this morning. If it comes to-morrow, you must re-direct it to London. Now I'll walk down to the shop with you and get the cash."

"All right," said Corrie reluctantly, after a pause. "But ye mun be careful what ye say before Rachel. I doubt if she's on our side now. Let her think ye're considering about giving me back the Zeniths for the girl. D'ye see?"

"Very well. Now that she's got Kitty's address she might easily make trouble."

"I wish," said Corrie, as they went down the road, "I wish ye would tell me how ye're going to get a hold o' her. Ha' ye got a plan?"

"Perhaps I have." Symington smiled darkly, and changed the subject.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Colin was seated in an exceedingly slow train on his way to the hospital where Sam the postman lay. Afterwards he would go on to Glasgow, and thence back to London by a line that did not pass near Dunford. In this he was simply obeying the instructions of Mr. Risk.

CHAPTER XVI

THAT nearly a fortnight should have passed without any effort on Symington's part to "get a hold" of Kitty may seem to the reader to require some explanation. Possibly sufficient will be found in a conversation between Risk and Colin, which took place on the twelfth day after the latter's call on the postmaster of Dunford. Colin had returned from Scotland, only to be dispatched, within a few hours, to an address in Amsterdam with a belt full of finely broken bottle glass next his skin, which he believed to be a fortune in uncut precious stones. Back from Holland he found written instructions to proceed to Madrid to fetch a little box purporting to contain 3,000 sovereigns, and actually concealing about half a hundredweight of lead.

And now, a trifle fagged, he was sitting in Risk's study, hoping to hear that he had done well. Risk did not keep him long in suspense.

After a few questions respecting the last journey he said, rather abruptly—

“ Well, Hayward, you’ve been serving me so far pretty much with your eyes shut: I wonder if you care to continue with your eyes open. I warn you that some of the work may be dull and most of it will be hard. I have got plenty of young men who work well in their own particular grooves, but I want one who is prepared to take on any job I put before him, just as I, with so many different interests, have had to do in the past for myself. I don’t expect you to learn everything at once, but I should expect you to be interested in everything that interests me. And I offer you £500 for the first year.”

Colin almost leapt from his seat. “ £500, Mr. Risk! Why, I’ll never be worth that!”

“ You’ll think differently six months hence. Meantime, do you accept?”

“ Oh, rather!—and thank you a——”

“ Then let’s talk of something else. For instance, I have word that your friend the postman has a chance of recovering, and I have to tell you about our friend Symington.”

“ I’ve been wondering,” said Colin, “ whether he accepted your invitation to call at the office.”

“ He did—the morning after you left for

Amsterdam. Incidentally, I got rather a good snap-shot of him. He seemed a trifle nervous until he received the new certificates, and then he coolly informed the secretary that he had purchased the old ones six years ago—an unmitigated lie, as we know. It remains to be seen, of course, whether he is acting for himself or for Corrie, and if the former, how many of the 5,000 shares have come into his possession.”

“You can’t prevent him selling the shares?”

“I could do that by circularizing all the exchanges and brokers, but sooner or later that would mean publicity. Besides, I want to give Mr. Symington rope just as I’ve given it to Mr. Corrie.”

“It may prove awfully expensive rope, Mr. Risk,” ventured Colin.

“I’m ready to pay for my amusement,” the other pleasantly returned, “and you don’t want me to tell you again that I will replace every share it may cost Miss Carstairs.”

“I didn’t mean that,” said Colin. “Only—well, you have been so good to me that I’d hate to see you lose——”

“Money! Yes, but think of the game, Hayward! And we’re going to win that. Why, it’s going to be the most tremendously interesting

business I ever tackled. You don't mind danger, do you ? ”

Colin laughed. “ I'm afraid I've had no experience, but I'm at your service, Mr. Risk. I suppose,” he went on, “ Symington has already converted some of the 500 shares into cash.”

“ We may assume that much. To put it mildly, he has been on the spree since the day he got the new certificates.”

“ You have had him watched ? ”

Risk nodded. “ And I have gone into his past to some extent. He is not a desirable person, I fear. But we shall leave him for the present. My sister and Miss Carstairs, also your friend West, are dining with me to-night, and I hope you are free to join us.”

Colin flushed with pleasure.

“ I should like you,” continued Risk, “ to make your quarters here for the present. Sharp has a room ready for you. And now I'm going to ask you an impertinent question. Have you any debts ? ”

“ No—well, I owe my father £100,” the young man replied ruefully.

“ Then pay it ; and if you think you have any grudge against him, forget it. For this year I will pay your salary quarterly, in advance.

Don't thank me. I simply want you to be able to serve me with as free a mind, and as light a heart, as possible. Frankly, you're an experiment." With a kindly laugh Risk proceeded to write a cheque.

It was no shame to Colin then if his eyes were moist. Surely his father would think kindlier of him now.

An hour later he and Kitty were face to face. Ages long it seemed since their parting in the little wood, less than three weeks ago! How much had happened since then! Perhaps Kitty was more at her ease than he. She had slipped into the new, pleasant life as though she belonged to it. She was still a little shy, but not awkwardly so. She had never been "countrified," yet Colin had always thought of her as a country maid—and had loved her none the less for that. In sunlight and moonlight he had deemed her the prettiest creature alive. But now, under the shaded electric lamps of a London drawing-room, in a white muslin frock that gave glimpses of her neck and arms, he beheld her, and his faithful heart ached at her fresh loveliness.

"Isn't this wonderful?" she whispered, smiling, as they shook hands.

Poor Colin! He managed to smile in return,

but not a word could he find, for in that moment he realized that he loved her more than ever, and that if his love had been wellnigh hopeless before, it was utterly hopeless now. For with all his resolutions to put her out of his life on coming to London, he had indulged a dream of fighting for success in order that he might one day rescue her from dreariness or hardship, and somehow win her for his own. Alas, now he comprehended only too fully what the Zeniths meant to himself. Kitty would be a very rich young woman. He could serve her in nothing at all. What an irony that the man who had given him his first step upwards—and a great step, too—should be the man to set his dearest desire beyond his reach ! Well, there was nothing for it but to cleave to duty and have done with dreams.

Nevertheless it was a cheerful little dinner-party, and during it the love-lorn young man and Hilda Risk laid the foundations of a lasting friendship. Towards the close of the repast Kitty was telling the host of her father's unfinished novel which Mr. West had just completed.

“He did it in six days, Mr. Risk,” she said warmly, “and I could not have told that it was not my father's own work. It was wonderful.”

“Not at all,” said West, in his matter-of-fact voice. “There was next to nothing for me to do, for the last act was foreshadowed. It’s a great play, Risk. Craven of the *Planet*, whom I got to read it right away, admitted as much this very day, though he wouldn’t accept it.”

“Why?” asked Risk.

“Too much unlike recent successes, I suppose,” said West drily. “And I believe it would draw all London.”

“Miss Carstairs,” said Risk kindly, “wouldn’t you like to see your father’s play performed?”

The girl’s shining eyes answered for her.

“I think I can persuade Craven,” remarked Risk, turning to West. “Can you arrange a meeting between us for the day after to-morrow?”

“By jove!” said West softly. “The thing’s done! Miss Carstairs, take my word for it, that play will bring you a little fortune. Risk, God bless you!”

Kitty looked from one to the other. “Is it—is it really and truly going to be?” she asked, tremulously.

“Leave it to Mr. Risk,” cried West in high delight.

“I think you may, Miss Carstairs,” Risk said,

with that amused look of his. "But don't count on the fortune just yet. Still, I'll make the best terms I can for you——"

"And Mr. West," she put in quickly. "Please don't think me ungrateful and horrid, Mr. Risk, but I don't wish you to—to trouble about the play at all [unless Mr. West promises—on paper, too—to take half the profits—if any.]"

"Never!" shouted West, indignant.

"Goodness me," said Hilda, interrupting her talk with Colin, "what on earth is the matter, Anthony?"

"Nothing, my dear," replied her brother. "Merely Anthony's little way of receiving a decent business proposition." He turned to Kitty. "Never mind, Miss Carstairs; we three shall have a talk together later, and——"

Sharp came into the room with a note on a salver.

"Messenger boy brought it, sir; said it was immediate," he murmured to his master, as he presented the salver to Kitty. "No answer, madam," he said aloud, and retired.

Kitty had taken the note mechanically, but now as she sat staring at it, the colour ebbed from her face. The plain envelope was directed to her—in rather shaky writing—care of Miss

Risk, 366 Long Acre; apparently Hilda's servant had sent the messenger on to Aberdare Mansions.

Anthony West alone made any effort to sustain the conversation, but then he was the only person present to whom the incident appeared ordinary, and he, too, soon fell silent at the sight of the girl's pallor.

At last the host said gently: "Hadn't you better open it, Miss Carstairs? It may be nothing so very serious after all."

Kitty seemed to nerve herself; she even smiled faintly—as she tore away the flap. She took out a piece of ruled paper folded once—a page torn from a note-book—opened it, and forced herself to read the two lines scrawled upon it in pencil.

Then the paper fell from her fingers, and with a little cry of pain she put up her hands and hid her face.

CHAPTER XVII

HILDA was the first to make a movement. She rose and passed quickly round the table to the apparently stricken girl.

“Kitty,” she said quietly, “remember you are among friends here—friends, who will not permit any person or thing to harm you.” She laid a reassuring hand on the girl’s shoulder.

The host also rose, signing to Colin and West to follow him from the room. But just then Kitty let her hands fall from her face. No longer was it pale, for the shock of fear was past, and her cheeks glowed with honest indignation.

“Mr. Risk, please don’t go away,” she said a little unsteadily. “I don’t wish any one to go away. I’m so sorry to upset everything like this——”

“Don’t worry about that,” Risk said gently. “As my sister has just remarked, we are your friends, and we are all ready and anxious to serve you. You really want us to remain?”

“Please.” She turned to Hilda. “I want you

to read it aloud," she said, pointing to the note.

Hilda picked up the paper, and she, too, flushed as her eyes took in the pencilled words.

"The beast!" she muttered under her breath. She took West's seat which he had vacated for her.

"This note," she announced, "has neither address nor signature. It has evidently been pencilled by a person under the influence of rage, illness, or—alcohol. It asks:—'Do your new friends know where you got the money that brought you to London?' . . . That is all."

Colin went ruddy, half rose, and subsided with mingled feelings—anger at the insult to Kitty, dread lest for her sake he should be forced to confess to sending her the hundred pounds, and a sudden recognition that not so long ago he had held a similar piece of paper bearing an anonymous message in pencil.

"And now," said Kitty in a steadier voice, though she was pale again, "will you, please, tell them all you know about me, Hilda; all I have told you about myself."

The host poured a little wine into a glass and set it before her, saying: "My dear Miss Carstairs, I want to know only one thing. Who is the unspeakable cad who wrote that?"

Kitty took a sip and smiled faintly. "If you can be bothered listening to my rather unpleasant little story, which I want Hilda to tell," she said slowly, "I think you may guess the writer's name. At least, I can think of only one person who would do such a thing——"

"Symington!" burst from Colin's lips.

"The gentleman who, unfortunately, has never called here," said Risk quietly.

"Of course, it can be no other," cried Hilda, in unwonted excitement.

Colin was on his feet. "Mr. Risk, will you excuse——" he was beginning when Sharp entered.

"Mr. Symington," the servant intimated, "wishes to speak with Miss Carstairs on the 'phone."

There were blank looks until Hilda, with recovered coolness, said—

"Sharp, will you tell Mr. Symington that Miss Carstairs is afraid of contamination, even over the wire."

"Very good, Hilda," her brother remarked. "Have you got it clearly, Sharp?"

"Yes, sir," the servant answered, and calmly repeated the words. Then he went out.

Risk turned to Colin, who was still standing,

and gave a nod, murmuring: "All right, Hayward, we'll excuse you. Good luck!"

Colin bowed to the ladies, and with a curious set look on his face left the room.

Hilda glanced at her brother, but said nothing. Kitty was feeling a little hurt, and, perhaps, a little relieved also. Why should Colin have wanted to escape hearing her story? On the other hand, it would, perhaps, be less trying to hear it told without his presence.

"Let's have coffee in the study, John," said Hilda suddenly, "and I'll try to do what Kitty asks. I do think you and Anthony ought to know how abominably she has been treated, especially as one of her wretched persecutors seems to be losing his head and getting to work again."

"Personally," said Risk, "I confess to acute curiosity. In two minutes we shall do as you suggest, Hilda. Meanwhile, Miss Carstairs, let us try to come to some agreement with West about the play."

It was a tactful suggestion, for Kitty was requiring a change of thought rather badly just then.

Later, as they were passing to the study, Sharp got a word with his master in the hall.

“Mr. Hayward asked me to tell you, sir, that he was making a call at the Kingsway Grand Hotel, but that he did not expect to be long in returning.”

“Very well. . . . Did he ask for anything before he left the house ? ”

“A flexible cane, sir, which I chanced to be able to provide.”

Risk nodded, and looking serious, was about to follow his guests, when a thought seemed to strike him.

“Sharp, did Mr. Symington make any response to the message ? ”

“He did, sir.”

“What did he say ? ”

Sharp hesitated, “Well, sir,” he replied at last, solemnly, “I should say he contaminated the wire, sir ! ”

* * * * *

In common justice it should be stated here that Alexander Symington was not a faithful slave to alcohol. As a rule he kept the upper hand. A full record of his adult life, however, would show that at long intervals and at times of extreme excitement, he lost his grip, fell, and simply wallowed. His collapse on this occasion was probably the result of his converting a hundred Zeniths

into nearly five hundred pounds sterling. With pockets full of notes and gold, and with the sure prospect of being able to refill them as soon as emptied—refill them over and over again—it is small wonder that he became reckless in an abnormal degree. At all events, the money was not in his pockets for an hour when, with the assistance of a couple of fellows no finer-souled than himself, he entered upon a bout of dissipation as wild as it was varied. Even Kitty was forgotten. . . .

And now he was in process of “coming to himself”—and a very unpleasing process it was. Physically, though weakened, he was less disorganized than might have been expected ; mentally, however, his state was that of extreme annoyance with himself and savage resentment against the world in general, and two persons in particular. He could not remember all the idiotic acts he had committed in the course of those crazy days and nights, but he was clearly and disagreeably aware that besides squandering four hundred and seventy pounds, he had presented his two boon companions with a hundred Zeniths apiece for no reason or purpose that he could soberly name. He was further tormented by the bitter reflection that he had wasted ten

valuable days. For all he knew, Kitty, in that period, might have put herself beyond his reach for good and all. Also he had lately received from Corrie a somewhat peremptory note requesting him to report progress, and breathing a novel and unpleasant spirit of independence.

It was in this harassed condition, and with a still clouded intelligence, that he had obeyed the two impulses in the direction of Kitty, of which we have seen the results—so far. And now, not so many minutes after the telephone episode, he was already cursing himself for a silly fool, and asking what madness was upon him that he should have as good as warned the girl against himself.

He had determined to spend this evening in the sitting-room of his suite reserved in the Kingsway Grand Hotel, a hostelry largely patronized by unattached gentlemen with money to burn. An hour ago he had dined very lightly and temperately, but the reaction from the previous over-indulgence had soon afterwards demanded more stimulant, and a pint bottle of champagne stood on a small table convenient to his easy chair. He was expecting his two friends, but hoping that something—a motor accident, fatal, for choice—might yet prevent them from turning up. It would be many a day before he forgave

these two, for although he had freely presented them the Zeniths, he now regarded them about as kindly as if they had robbed him.

He lit a cigarette with an unsteady hand, took a mouthful of wine and lay back in his chair, sluggish of body, sullen of soul. When, a moment later, he heard the door open, he swore under his breath, but did not so much as turn his head. He anticipated a greeting as the door was shut—a bluff greeting of the “What ho” order; wherefore the words that came after a brief pause were something of a shock.

“You swine!”

He started up to see “young Hayward” standing over him, with a look in his eyes that boded anything but goodwill.

Colin was full of fury, but it was the frigid sort.

“What the deuce do you want?” said Symington at last, and his hand stole behind him. His recent pleasure-hunt had included visits to one or two rather queer corners of London town, down by the docks.

“What you want is a thrashing,” answered Colin, “and I’m here to give it you.”

Symington’s complexion went from scarlet to grey.

“What the —— do you mean by intruding

here? If you don't clear out——" His hand went up with a glitter. "Out of this, you young fool, or by——"

Swish! Like a flash the whangee cane smote his knuckles. With a cry he let drop the weapon. Colin kicked it across the room.

Hissing with wrath and pain, Symington sprang up and made a dash for the bell. No use! He was seized by the collar, shaken vigorously, then dragged to the table in the centre of the room, from which the dessert had not been removed. Mercilessly he was thrown across it, his face in a dish of raisins, and in that undignified position, vainly struggling, he received a most painful chastisement.

Often afterwards Colin, whose weight and muscle were nothing exceptional, would wonder how on earth he had managed to handle successfully a heavy man like Symington; but love and hate combined with honest rage gave him, for the time being, the strength of three, and moreover his victim was flabby after a long debauch.

The noise of the caning coupled with the involuntary exclamations of the sufferer were, however, not long in attracting attention, and a knock on the door warned Colin that it was time to desist. Putting his whole heart into a final

cut, which brought forth a yelp of anguish, he loosed his grip, saying rather breathlessly—

“That is the reply to your anonymous notes, Mr. Symington, and if you want to call the police now, pray do so.”

A waiter, mouth open, was staring from the doorway.

Symington stood up, his expression devilish. He had a fruit knife in his hand—a frail, pretty thing, yet pointed. He lunged at his enemy's face. Again the cane swished, and the knife fell to the floor.

“Gentlemen,” gasped the waiter.

“Well ? ” inquired Colin. “Is it to be the police ? ”

“Damn you ! Get out of this ! I'll make you sorrier than any police judge could do.”

“Very well,” said Colin, turning to the door. “In the meantime,” he added, over his shoulder, “if I were you, I'd get the waiter to remove the raisins from your chin and left eyebrow.” With that, perhaps the unkindest cut of all, he went out, leaving Symington almost beside himself with passion.

As for the waiter, the unfortunate creature was so tactless as to smile at the raisins, and two days later he was dismissed from the hotel service.

As soon as he reached the street, Colin realized that he was shaking all over. "What a rage I must have been in!" he said to himself, half gladly, half ruefully.

"Well, I guess he won't trouble Kitty again, and I don't see how he's going to get at me."

But Colin did not know Symington, or he would have, at least, qualified his confidence. As a matter of fact, by thrashing the man he had simply turned a cad into a blackguard. But he drove back to Aberdare Mansions feeling that he had been able to do something for his beloved after all, though she must never know of it, and he arrived there happier than he had been for months.

Risk met him in the hall with a quizzical smile.

"Found him out, I suppose, Hayward?"

"That's for you to do, Mr. Risk," was the blithe reply. "I found him in, and I fancy he'll not move far to-night, at all events."

"Don't tell me," said Risk, his eyes on the cane, "you whacked the beggar!"

"To the best of my ability." Colin found his hand being shaken.

"It was splendid, Hayward," Risk said gravely, "and we must hope it was also wise. Now we'll forget about it for the present. Come along and have your coffee. We have heard Miss Carstairs'

story, and West and I are her willing servants, till she comes to her own. But, of course, she must not know we are working for her, and she must, if possible, be induced to forget those ugly little incidents of to-night—or, at any rate, be prevented from dwelling on them.”

A couple of hours later, the night being exquisite, Colin walked home with Kitty, West escorting Hilda.

“Mr. Risk is giving you plenty to do, isn’t he?” Kitty remarked, making an effort to shake off the feeling of restraint that had come upon her on finding herself alone with Colin.

“Yes,” said Colin, who was hampered by a similar sensation. “But he’s worth working for. He has given me a chance that I might have sought in vain all my life. But never mind about me, Kitty,” he went on. “I wish very much to know what you—or rather Miss Risk—told the others while I was absent to-night.”

“I think I’d rather not talk about it,” she said, after a short pause. “Mr. West, or Mr. Risk, will tell you, if you really want to know.”

“Kitty, why do you say that, and in such a tone?”

“Why did you go away almost as soon as I asked Hilda to tell my story?”

“Why? Well, because—” he hesitated—“because it suddenly occurred to me that—that there was a thing I must attend to,” he concluded lamely. “Good heavens, Kitty, you surely didn’t imagine that I was anything but keen to hear your story! Ever since I learned you were in London I’ve been wondering how the great change came about.”

His earnestness overcame her doubts.

“I’m a horrid thing, Colin,” she declared self-reproachfully, “but I wanted to make sure that you did not despise me——”

“Despise you!”

“—for running away from Dunford, and for accepting the kindness of strangers as I have done.”

“What an absurd idea, Kitty! I won’t tell you how glad I was to hear you were in London and in the care of such friends. Show that you trust me a little better by telling me how it all came about. By the way, have you heard from Dunford since you left?”

She shook her head. “I sent my aunt my address, and told her I was ^{very} all right, but she has not answered. Well, I’m not so surprised at that as at not hearing from Sam, the postman. It was he who helped me to get away——”

“ Won’t you begin at the beginning ? ”

“ Very well—only you must promise not to discuss it afterwards. It’s not a pretty story, Colin, and only in self-protection did I ask Hilda to tell it to-night. Well, here it is.”

She told it simply and in few words, and he heard her to the end without a single interruption. Now and then, indeed, when her voice wavered, he would have given all his future to have taken her for one moment into his arms. The incident of the £100 brought a flush to his face, while he blessed the thought that had caused him to send her the means for escape ; but the tale of her uncle’s hideous treachery turned him ghastly with wrath and pity.

“ And so,” she finished, “ the journey that started so miserably ended most wonderfully, and here I am with all my dreams come true ”—she gave a small rueful laugh—“ except one. For I used to dream of being brave and independent and even adventurous ; and now——”

“ Oh, Kitty, thank God you didn’t arrive in London alone ! ” he exclaimed.

“ I do,” she returned softly. “ I was a little fool to imagine I could ever have stood alone and made my own way. I’m self-supporting now with my typing, but that’s all thanks to Hilda.

Colin, did you ever hear of anything so wonderful as the way things have turned out for me? Do you know, once or twice I've thought it might all have been planned out by Mr. Risk—that he, for my father's sake, might have been secretly watching over me. . . . Some day, when I know him better, I'll ask him straight about the £100. Don't you think I might do that?"

"Certainly," said Colin cheerfully. "And so now you are perfectly happy, Kitty?"

"Yes, I am!" she answered, with just a trace of defiance. She was not going to admit that there was something lacking, and perhaps she was not quite sure what the "something" was. And, of course, it was nothing to her that Colin, earlier in the evening, had appeared to be greatly taken with Hilda—and Hilda's lovely eyes!

Later, he mentioned that West and he desired to take her and Hilda to a theatre on the coming Friday. Kitty had already been to several theatres, yet, somehow, the prospect thrilled her more than it had done prior to previous visits, though her acceptance of the invitation, given subject to Hilda's approval, was little more than polite.

They were nearly home when Colin said rather diffidently—

“ I’ve promised not to discuss Dunford or the people there, but, Kitty, I’d just like to hear that you are no longer afraid of that wretched worm, Symington.”

After a moment she replied : “ No, Colin. For that moment, at dinner, I was afraid, horribly afraid, I admit. But I’ve got over it. For what can the man do ? ”

CHAPTER XVIII

SINCE last we saw them John and Rachel Corrie, apart from the conversation necessitated by business, had scarcely spoken to each other. The man kept a sullen silence, lest in speech he might betray his real intentions; the woman, having come to mistrust in all his ways the being whom she loved more than herself, held her peace lest she should lead him into self-betrayal, for now she feared the worst so greatly that she could not face the sure knowledge thereof. Rachel knew by this time why she had heard no more from Kitty. Her three letters to the girl had never passed beyond the post office—she had actually and secretly witnessed her brother destroy the last—and she naturally assumed that if Kitty had written again, her letter had met a similar fate.

Although the new assistant and postman were conversant with their duties, Corrie never failed to postmark with his own hand both outward and

inward mails. His manner had become disagreeably furtive ; always he seemed to be watching, waiting for something to happen. Rachel's poor heart bled for him ; she blamed the sin more than the sinner ; and she would have given her soul to save his. Night after night she lay long awake, brooding, scheming to the end that he might be rescued—in a worldly sense, to begin with. She fondly believed that if he were drawn back from his present sinning, his life for the future would be sinless. She believed, also, that it was Symington whom she would have to overcome in the first place. To Rachel Corrie, Symington, in the night watches, appeared as Satan himself.

And at last, at a sultry midnight, such a midnight as had witnessed her dreadful deed for her brother's sake, a vague idea drifted, from Heaven knows where, into her distracted, weary mind, and lodged there. Ere she slept it had developed to a grim purpose, which even the searching light of morning could not weaken.

She would render Symington powerless, helpless, by depriving him of the Zenith certificates ! . . . But how ? It cost her many more sleepless hours and much aching thought before she could answer the question. But eventually, the way was found, and while it appalled her, she would not

turn back. However, she would have to bide her time. For one thing, the mill was at present too busy—the mill which, you will remember, was one of John Corrie's properties apart from the general store—and the mill was involved in her scheme. For another, a word with Symington might have helpful results.

It was on the third evening following that of his castigation that Symington appeared in Dunford. He came in response to a curt note from the postmaster: "It is time you and me had a talk. Look sharp." A telegram preceded him. For the first time since his last visit Corrie mentioned the man's name to Rachel.

"Symington'll be here 'tween eight and nine."

"I'll be out," she returned calmly.

For a moment he was taken aback. Then—"As ye please," he said, and after a slight pause added: "I expect your niece'll get the shares before long."

He did not look at her, nor did she at him as she replied—

"Very well, John. I'll be glad when it's a' settled."

She left the house at the hour the train was due, and took the road which led to White Farm and also to the mill, a couple of miles farther on.

Symington arrived at the cottage in a bad humour.

“What the devil do you keep on bothering me for?” he demanded the moment he was in the parlour. “I’m going ahead as quickly as I can. Do you want me to ruin the whole thing by rushing it.”

“No use in losing your temper,” said Corrie coldly. “It’s a fortnight past since ye started to get a hold o’ the girl. I want to ken what ye’ve been doing in London, besides enjoying yourself.”

“Don’t talk about enjoyment! I tell you I’ve been busy the whole time.”

“Well, what ha’ ye done?”

Symington took out a cigar. “Look here—what are you trying to drive me for? What’s at the back of this cry for haste?”

“There’s a chance o’ the postman getting better.”

“Well, curse him for a nuisance, and you for a bungler!”

“Mind, I’ve got that letter!” snarled Corrie.

“You’d never use it? . . . However, I may tell you that I’ve completed my arrangements for the capture of Miss Kitty.”

“And what may they be?”

“ I think I’d better not tell you. You’re so tender-hearted ! ”

A grey shadow came over Corrie’s face. “ Is—is it going to hurt her ? ” he whispered. “ I canna consent to her being hurt—seriously.”

Symington laughed shortly. “ You think I’d hurt Kitty, do you ? Sometimes I fancy you’re a bit cracked, Corrie ! Well, I must admit it’s going to be a little unpleasant, inconvenient, for her—but nothing worse. She’s going to disappear for a time——”

“ Where ? ”

“ You’re better not to know in case you’re asked—see ? ”

The postmaster plucked at his lower lip. “ Maybe,” he mumbled, “ maybe.”

“ And young Hayward’s going to disappear likewise.”

“ God ! Are ye no’ afraid ? . . . But how am I to believe ye ? ”

“ Give me four days—a week at most. Now, don’t ask any more questions, for I’m not going to answer them. As I said, you’re better not to know anything.”

“ Just one. How long’ll it take, think ye to—to make her give in ? ”

Symington had drunk a good deal of wine on

the train, or he might not have answered as he did.

“How long does it take to starve a healthy man ? ”

* * * * *

In the dusk Symington was nearing the farm when, from a gate in the hedge, Rachel Corrie stepped into his path.

“I want a word wi’ ye, Mr. Symington,” she said bluntly.

“Well ? ”

“And first I’ll tell ye that John doesna ken o’ this.”

“Go on.” He was annoyed at the interruption, for he had much to think of before he slept that night, and he was returning to London by the early morning train. Also he was tormented by a craving for something to drink.

“’Tis about the Zeniths,” she proceeded.

“None of your business, I should say, Miss Corrie.”

“I say different. But I only want ye to satisfy me that ye are dealing fair with my brother——”

“How dare you insinuate——”

“No need for temper,” she went on steadily. “John maybe wouldna like to ask ye himself, but I’m going to put a straight question, for it’s been on my mind for a while now——”

“Kindly come to the point.”

“I will! Have ye or have ye not parted wi’ any o’ the shares?”

His indignation was well assumed. “If you were a man——” he began.

“But I’m only a woman, and not one of the blind, trusting sort, Mr. Symington. Still, I’m as curious as any.”

Suddenly he gave an ironic laugh. “Very well, Miss Corrie; I don’t want you to lose any more of your beauty sleep, so I give you my word that——”

“And ye’ll let me see the certificates, Mr. Symington,” she interrupted very firmly.

For an instant he hesitated. He might tell her that they were in his banker’s safe. But no: better exhibit them and have done with the matter.

“If I was not aware of your affection for your brother,” he said, “I’d consider your request an insult, and refuse it point-blank. However, you can come along to the house and be satisfied.”

He prepared for other questions, but she asked none, and presently he was showing her into the farm-house parlour, saying: “I’ll fetch them at once.”

She waited in the twilight, listening with all her

nerves, as it were. She heard him go upstairs, she counted his movements in the room directly overhead.

Symington knew he was taking no small risk. Originally the certificates, folded separately, had made a tape-tied bundle of ten, each certificate representing five hundred shares. Now there were only nine. But Symington took from his pocket a certificate for one hundred shares, and inserted it in the bundle. He could not tell how familiar she might be with the documents, but he trusted that she would be satisfied with finding the number of them correct, and reckoned that if she did insist on examining them separately, the dusk would prevent her detecting the discrepancy. So he came downstairs whistling.

"Thank ye," she said at once, without even touching the bundle; "I'll be getting home now."

For she had discovered what she wanted to know—not with her eyes, but with her ears.

"Silly old fool!" Symington remarked to himself, much relieved, as he went upstairs again. "I needn't go on worrying about her, anyway."

He entered his bedroom, returned the one hundred share certificate to his pocket, and deposited the bundle in an immensely heavy oaken chest, steel-bound and fastened to the

floor in the window. It had been the Symington "strong box" for generations. Only lately had the idea of superseding it with a modern safe occurred to the present owner.

"I'll write to Glasgow for a price list to-night," he thought, withdrawing the queer, stumpy key, and replacing the chintz cover, which gave the chest something of the appearance of an ottoman. "Yes; I'll write to-night." Just then his importunate thirst assailed him once more, and drove him downstairs to a cupboard in the parlour

CHAPTER XIX

ONE morning, about a week later, John Risk, on his arrival in the City, found his sister waiting in his private office.

“I’m ordered to Newcastle to-morrow, for a couple of days,” she informed him. “What am I to do about Kitty? Naturally, she’d imagine all sorts of things if I told her she must not leave the flat during my absence, and I can hardly afford to tell the editor I don’t——”

“You can take her with you, Hilda. Why not make a little holiday of it, and when you’ve finished the job at Newcastle, take a week by the sea somewhere? You’ve had no break this summer. You’re looking a bit fagged. Of course I’ll stand the racket.”

“Dear old thing, I don’t believe I can refuse!” she cried.

“Good! I’ll post you a cheque before midday. But now I must ask you to run away. This is my busy morning. By the way, you can tell

Miss Kitty that the play is going on almost immediately. West caved in last night, and agreed to take his share, and, as luck would have it, ——'s recent venture has turned out a frost, and the theatre is available——”

“John! how many thousands is this going to cost you?”

“None, I think. I believe in the play. However, that's none of your business. You don't think any the less of West for taking his share?”

“No, indeed! Besides Kitty forced him by declaring she would not have the play go on at all, if he refused.—Well, I'm off,” said Hilda rather hurriedly, and with some colour in her cheeks.

“One moment. You haven't been followed by that man, have you?” he inquired.

“No. Why do you ask? I'd have told you.”

“So you would, my dear. Symington is in town at present, and I happen to know he has been selling more shares.”

“Oh! . . . But, John, isn't it time to act?”

“Very nearly, I hope. That's all, Hilda. Good luck to your holiday.”

She kissed him and went out. A slight frown crossed his forehead for a moment. Then he pressed one of several buttons on his desk.

Colin entered. He had a letter in his hand.

“May I speak first, Mr. Risk? I’ve been waiting to show you this.” He handed over the letter; it was from the superintendent of the hospital where Sam the postman lay.

“Ah!” exclaimed Risk, “this is what was wanted! ‘The operation on the skull has been successful,’ he read, ‘and the patient is now well enough to give you a short interview.’ . . . Hayward, you must go North by the first train, learn all you can, and instruct him to hold his tongue for the present.”

“I can catch the 11.30 train,” said Colin, who was already acquiring the decisive ways of his friend and employer, “and may be there in time to see him to-night. You wish me to return at once?”

“I want you to take in Dunford on your way back and get me one or two photos. I’ll give you a note of what I require along with the camera. But that needn’t take you more than a couple of hours. Don’t you want to look up your people?”

“They’re all from home this month—thank you for thinking of it. I ought to tell you that my father and I have made it up—through the post.”

“That’s right! Now, before you go, will you do me a rough sketch of the postman’s house

before it was burned—that is, a drawing of the front, showing door, windows, etc., as correctly proportioned as you can make them. Jot the colourings at the side. . . . One thing more: you might break your return journey at Newcastle, for an hour or so. My sister and Miss Carstairs will be there to-morrow. I'll wire you where to find them to the hospital this afternoon."

Colin felt grateful, but merely returned a "Very well, Mr. Risk," and he hastened to his own office to get through the work on hand. The request for a sketch of Sam's old house puzzled him, as did the photographic business, but he possessed the valuable wit for knowing when to suppress questions.

Risk immediately plunged into a small ocean of correspondence. He had an extraordinary number of financial interests, and they really interested him apart from their finance. . . .

A secretary entered.

"Mr. Boon, of the Westminster Film Co., is here, sir. He has an appointment with you."

Risk glanced at the clock. "In two minutes," he said, returning to the correspondence, "show him in."

The secretary knew by this time that two minutes to Mr. Risk meant exactly 120 seconds

and on the 121st Mr. Boon was admitted. His visit lasted about fifteen minutes.

Before he left he was introduced to Colin, with whom he had a few minutes' conversation, which was probably more enlightening to himself than to the young man; and he took away with him the rude sketch of the Dunford postman's abode.

* * * * *

Rather late in the evening Colin, by special permission, was sitting at Sam's bedside. The postman was still weak, and the nurse had warned the visitor against anything in the way of excitement, but his memory was clear enough, and there was not, after all, a great deal to be remembered. Colin was soon in possession of the few facts worth having; they formed, at least, a valuable little appendix to Kitty's story. As to his assailant on the night of the fire, Sam frankly admitted that he had nothing better than suspicions to offer; yet he was convinced that the house had been deliberately set on fire, and that he had been assaulted in his weakness either by Corrie, or Symington, or both.

But Sam was not greatly interested in his own affairs. Time enough to think of punishment and revenge when he was on his feet again, he declared. He wanted to hear about Kitty.

Colin did his best to oblige him, leaving out, of course, all reference to Symington's last outbreak, and explaining that Kitty was not yet aware of her old friend's misfortune and illness.

"Quite right, quite right," said Sam. "So long as she's in good health, and wi' kind friends, I'm content. And before long I'll be getting the letter ye say she wrote me, just after she got to London. Ye see, we couldna trust Corrie, and she would send it to Peter Hart, the shepherd, in the next postal district."

"I'm going to tell her simply that you've had an accident," said Colin, "so you may expect a new letter from her immediately. . . . Now I see the nurse looking at me, and I suppose my time is up. But I must tell you, from Mr. Risk, that your house will be rebuilt, and ready for you by the time you are ready for it. Not a word, Sam! It's no use arguing with Mr. Risk, I know! . . . Well, I must go. Keep everything a secret for the present."

Sam clung to the young man's hand. "Tell her," he whispered, "to look out for Symington. Tell her the news o' her has done me a power o' good. Good luck to ye, Mr. Colin—good luck to ye both."

Colin hurried to the inn, wrote a letter, and

just managed to catch the late night mail for the south. The letter would reach Risk by the second morning delivery. Then he re-read the telegram he had found waiting for him at the hospital. It seemed to give him pleasant thoughts, for he smiled. It was from Hilda, and invited him to take tea the following afternoon in the Station Hotel, Newcastle.

Next morning he stepped from the early train at Dunford. In order to turn aside any local curiosity, he went straight to his father's house, and got the caretaker to give him breakfast, explaining that he had called on his way to London to collect one or two small articles from his old room. Thereafter he strolled around with his hand-camera and secured some "souvenir snapshots," as he put it to an interested villager. In the course of his stroll he recorded—surreptitiously, it should be remarked—a view of the back of Corrie's cottage, and another of the scene immediately in front of Sam's ruined dwelling.

Passing the post office on the way to the station, he obtained a glimpse of Corrie talking to a farmer in the doorway. Though he detested the man with all his soul, he was tempted to make room for a little pity, so haggard and wretched was the postmaster's appearance. Corrie, after a

slight start, gave a perfunctory wave of salutation, which Colin, feeling a hypocrite, returned.

By noon he was in the train again, counting the miles to Newcastle. Within half an hour of the train's leaving Dunford, Corrie dispatched a telegram to Symington—"Left at 11.50."

About the same hour in London, a message was flashed North to greet our traveller with a great disappointment. He had to change at Carlisle; and as he was boarding the Newcastle train there, his heart full of Kitty, hope struggling once more against resignation, an official carrying an orange envelope came along inquiring for "a Mr. Colin Hayward." And presently Colin was reading Risk's message—

"Urgent. Return straight to London."

There was just time to rush back to the express train he had so recently left. Afterwards there was more than enough time for wonder and worry.

CHAPTER XX

ON the afternoon of the same day, which happened to be the weekly half-holiday, Rachel Corrie returned from a longish walk undertaken, as she had announced to her brother at dinner, in the hope of relieving a severe headache. In these days it was for her a rare occurrence to leave the house at all, and a common one to have a headache, but Corrie had been too self-engrossed to be moved by surprise or sympathy.

Entering the cottage, Rachel certainly did not look much the better of the outing ; she seemed, in fact, to be suffering from a faintness, for at first she leaned awhile against the closed door, and she crept slowly and unsteadily up the passage, keeping her hand on the wall for support. Presently she was peering into the darkened shop ; listening, also. Ere long her brother's voice came indistinctly from the post office beyond ; she gathered that he was checking figures with the assistant. Rachel appeared to nerve herself,

then stepped stealthily into the shop. On a nail in the wall, just behind the door, she hung a ponderous key—the spare key of the mill, which had been idle that day for the first time in several weeks. For fully a minute she stood motionless save for her breathing, her hand pressed hard to her heart; then, with a heavy sigh, she stole out and laboriously ascended to her room. She was wholly spent as she fell upon her bed, yet at the end of an hour she was down in the kitchen preparing the evening meal, to which her brother would come when he had finished with the inward evening mail.

Of late John Corrie's appetite had been indifferent; to-night it seemed to have failed him altogether. He sat there speechless, now and then taking a sup of tea, and never once allowing his gaze to fall on his sister—not that she, poor soul, could have met it for an instant. Nevertheless, at last she forced herself to speak.

“Can ye no' eat, John?”

He shook his head impatiently. “Let me be. I'm no' hungry.”

With her eyes on the cloth she said in a strange gentleness of tone: “John, dinna trouble over much. Maybe everything 'll come right yet. Dinna be vexed wi' me, but I believe—John, I

believe that if ye took pen now and wrote to Kitty, telling her the truth——” She stopped short, so dreadful was his expression.

“Let that be,” he growled, “or ye’ll drive me stark mad. Peace!—no’ another word!” He got up and strode from the room.

In his pocket was a letter, the postmark on which would have told that it had been posted in London about midnight; a letter which he had been expecting for days, consisting of one pencilled word—“Arrested”—with neither address nor signature. And by that solitary word Corrie’s soul was racked, as between a man’s last hope and his final terror.

Alone, Rachel put her hand to her face.

“Oh God,” she murmured, “if only it had been possible. . . . But now the candle mun be left to burn—burn to the end. . . . Maybe—oh, surely—I’ll save him yet.”

In her methodical way she cleared the table, washed the dishes, and set the kitchen in order. Afterwards she sat by the fire and tried to read the morning’s paper. She noticed that on the previous day Zeniths had risen to £6, but the sensational advance moved her not at all. Long after she had ceased to read she kept staring at the printed page. At seven o’clock, feeling her

strength ebbing, and knowing how vital it was that she should conserve every spark of energy in her, she went up to her room and lay down. There was still another hour, possibly more, to wait and endure. . . .

At last—at last the sound of running and excited shouts . . . a thundering on the door below . . . the opening of the door—

“Mr. Corrie, the mill’s on fire!”

A pause that seemed an age, then her brother’s voice, harsh, yet almost calm—

“Rachel, the mill’s on fire!”

“I’m coming,” she tried to call, producing naught but a croak.

She got to the window in time to see him hastening away in the failing light. She made no attempt to follow just then. She lingered, crouching there behind the curtain, until the heavy silence informed her that practically the whole population of Dunford had bolted to the scene of destruction. Then body and wits under control once more, she took the implements she had prepared, cloaked herself and set out on the road to the mill. Not a soul was in sight.

Her destination was the White Farm. At the door she knocked, ready to plead faintness should the unexpected happen. But no one came. She

had gauged pretty accurately the duty sense of housekeeper and servants in the master's absence. One and all had incontinently deserted the place and their occupations to see the fire she had raised. A chained dog barked wildly ; she did not appear to hear it.

The door was not locked. She entered and without hesitation climbed the stair. She had been welcome in the house in the old and happier days of Symington's parents. She had often seen the strong box in its original place in the sitting-room. Doubtless it was upstairs. She was counting on that. If he had lately got a safe she had burned the mill to no purpose. . . . But God would not let her be cheated so, for was it not all done for her brother's salvation ? . . .

And now she was in the apartment above the sitting-room. The light was very dim, but she soon found what she sought. In a moment the chintz cover was off and laid aside. Then in a sort of splendid fury, with heavy, powerful tools, she attacked the lock, wrenching, twisting, thrusting, driving, heedless of the attendant noise.

And at last the mauled and shattered thing gave. With a fierce blow of hammer on sturdy screw-driver she drove it inwards. The heavy lid yielded. The bundle of Zenith certificates

were there for her to take. She hid them in her dress. . . .

She swept up the smallest trace of her work, closed the lid, and neatly replaced the chintz cover. There would be no discovery till Symington himself made it. As she left the house she glimpsed, away to the left, a smoky glow, over the hollow that hid the mill. Without a second glance she set out for home along the still deserted road.

Having bolted the cottage door and returned the tools to their place, she sat down to examine her prize.

“The scoundrel has parted wi’ 500 shares!” she muttered after a careful recount of the certificates. “Poor John, it was an evil day when ye let Alec Symington into this house. But Kitty ’ll forgive ye a tenth part o’ her fortune—if she doesna, I’ll offer her every penny I possess. Oh, John, I think I’ve saved ye; and some day I’ll confess to ye about the mill. I’ll never regret it. . . . But what’s this?”

She had become conscious of a folded paper, unlike in texture the certificates, lying on her lap. She must have inadvertently picked it from the strong box along with the bundle. It was endorsed “Lease of House at 73 Lester Road,

Richmond, Surrey.” She opened it and read. . . .

“So he’s got a house at that place,” she reflected. “Well, it’s none o’ my business. I wonder if John kens. Likely no. . . . I’ll ha’ to try to put it back in the box—no! I’ll risk nothing for that scoundrel’s sake! He can want his lease!” She made to toss it into the fire, then drew back. “I’ll keep it in the meantime along wi’ the shares till the time comes for telling John. . . . The sooner they’re hid the better.” She rose, and stood wavering. “Oh, God, but I’m weak,” she whispered. “Help me to win through.”

* * * * *

It was late when her brother came in, begrimed and drenched. She had a meal all but ready for him.

“Tell me about it, John,” she said, as he came to the fire in dry garments. “I couldna gang—couldna bear to see it.”

“Ye would ha’ seen a grand blaze,” he returned bitterly. “There’s nothing left—new machinery and all!”

“Well, well,” she said soothingly, “it’s a fine thing an insurance policy.”

“Very fine—when ye’ve paid the premium.”

Stopping short in her hospitable task, she stared at him. "But ye ha' paid it a month back !"

"Did I ? . . . The days o' grace were up three weeks back, but—but I had—ower many other things to think about." A groan burst from him, he put his hands to his head. "Three thousand pound gone up in three hours !"

Rachel's mouth opened, but she was dumb. As if frozen she stood there by the table, a plate of cut bread in her hand.

"Aye," he went on heavily, "and I'll take my oath it was no accident, for the place where the fire started——"

With a strangled cry the woman tottered and fell crashing across the table.

Ghastly, Corrie sprang to her assistance. Stumblingly he carried her to his chair by the hearth. She was not unconscious ; her collapse had been mainly physical. Blood was dropping from a gash in her wrist.

"Dinna heed me," she murmured ; "I'll be all right in a minute, John."

He fetched water and cloths, knelt, washed the wound and bandaged it awkwardly yet with some tenderness. Slow tears ran down her cheeks.

"Am I hurting ye, Rachel ?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He spoke again. "I shouldna ha' told ye so quick about the insurance. Dinna keep thinking on it." Then with obviously a great effort—"Ye've been a good sister to me, Rachel. I—I wish I had been a better brother."

His words left her speechless. What had come to him?

He answered the unspoken question.

"Money's no everything, after all," he said hoarsely, shamefacedly. "When I saw ye fall I thought ye were killed—thought I had killed ye—wi' ma tongue. And—and just for an instant I saw myself without ye—alone—in this house—in this place—in the whole world. I had never thought o' it that way before." He sighed, and got to his feet. "We'll say no more about it, Rachel, but I'll try to treat ye better from now." He cleared his throat, and averting his gaze said: "I wish I had never set eyes on Symington."

Rachel restrained herself then, not for her own sake, but for his. For his own safety he must not know her secret a moment before the time was ripe. Moreover, though his kind words had moved her deeply, they had not healed her wounded trust in him.

All she could say was: "Ye'll aye find me

ready and willing to help ye, John ; and it's never too late——”

“ I doubt it.” He sighed again heavily. “ But things mun take their course now. . . . Ye'd better gang to your bed, or ye'll be useless in the morning, and I've got to be early at the mill. I'll get my supper myself.”

She went without a word.

Corrie sank into his chair.

“ Almighty ! ” he moaned to himself, “ what devil started me speculating on the Stock Exchange ? . . . Gone, the savings o' a life-time ! . . . And now the mill that would ha' sold for enough to save me and maybe my savings likewise—in ashes—just ashes ! It's ruin, black ruin, unless Symington does all he's promised. . . . And the postman's getting better ! . . . God ! I'd write to Kitty this night, if it wasna too late—but now I'm damned in her eyes for ever and ever ! ”

* * * * *

Small wonder if it were indeed so !

In the study at Aberdare Mansions, Colin, very pale, sat staring at a sheet of typewritten paper, which Risk had put into his hand, saying—

“ My sister, as I've already explained, found this on her return to the flat. Steady, now ! ”

On the sheet was written, in apparent haste, the following :—

“ DEAR HILDA,—

“ A detective has come to arrest me. He says it's the Post Office. I'm not a bit afraid, only sorry to trouble you so. Sam will see me through. Good-bye for a little while.

“ KITTY.”

CHAPTER XXI

KITTY was not a little excited at the prospect of her trip with Hilda, though at first her pride had raised a difficulty, and she had begged to be allowed to pay her own expenses.

"Very well," Hilda had promptly rejoined, "if you wish to hurt my brother's feelings, not to mention mine, I can't prevent you. Besides, you will spoil my holiday——"

"But, Hilda, I can't be always taking——"

"You can have your revenge when the play is making your fortune."

"I wonder if it will. . . . Anyway, I'm glad Mr. West is going to be reasonable, aren't you?"

"Let's go out and buy things for our holiday," Hilda had said rather hurriedly. "We have no time to waste to-day. It's a nuisance, but I'm afraid I shall have to go to the office for an hour to-night, so that I may leave things in shape."

"And I must finish that typing before I go to

bed. Oh, Hilda, sometimes I can't help feeling that it's all a dream ! ”

“ What—the typing ? ”

“ All the wonderful things that have happened to me lately. Why, it's not a month since that horrible time in Dunford. I only wish for one thing—to hear from Sam, the postman. I can't understand his not writing.”

“ Possibly, Mr. Hayward, who has gone to Scotland, my brother's note tells me, will have news. I am wiring him to take tea with us at Newcastle to-morrow afternoon.”

“ Oh ! ”

“ And, naturally, I want to look my best ! So come along to the shops at once ! By the way, we have dinner early to-night—Matilda's evening at the picture house.”

* * * * *

It was now shortly after eight. Hilda had not been long gone to the office, after promising to return by ten and wishing, secretly, that she had asked Matilda to postpone her outing. But her casual suggestion in that direction had been scoffed at by Kitty ; and to have carried it further would only have made the girl uncomfortable.

Kitty was too absorbed to feel lonely. Under the shaded electric light she was making an effort

to finish her typing before Hilda's return. She was in the best of spirits that youth and health can supply, and she was looking forward eagerly to the morrow—and, perhaps, the morrow's afternoon.

Nevertheless, she did start when a bell in the distance purred suddenly. "Silly!" she called herself the next moment. It was just the hour for the postman, and probably he had a packet that would not go into the letter-box. She went at once to the door.

A thick-set man of middle age, heavily moustached, but not unpleasantly featured, in dark tweeds and bowler hat, said—

"You are Miss Kitty Carstairs."

Before she could answer, he was standing beside her and the door was closed.

"I have something to say to you, Miss Carstairs," he proceeded in a quiet voice. "I think you ought to sit down to hear it."

For some seconds the girl was incapable of speech and action. But her mind was working, and it perceived that she gained no advantage by remaining in the confined space of the little passage. In silence she led the way to the sitting-room.

"Who are you and what do you want with

me ? ” she managed to say, taking her stand with the table between them. She began to suspect that he was a messenger from Symington, but there was something “decent” about his face that reassured her.

His reply was certainly unexpected.

“I am a detective, and I hold a warrant for your arrest. I have to warn you that anything you may say now may be used against you later.”

Kitty went white, but it was with anger. “Who,” she demanded at last, “has dared to do such a thing ? Who desires my arrest ? ”

“The warrant is issued at the instance of the Postmaster-General——”

“Ah ! . . . I see ! I suppose——”

“Miss Carstairs. I warn you again——”

“Does all this mean that I have got to go with you—now—to the police office ? ” To herself she was saying : “Don’t be a coward ! You’ve nothing to be afraid of.”

“It is my duty to take you there,” the man answered, “and I hope you will not make it harder for me than you can help.”

His respectful tone stayed the sinking of her heart.

“Can’t I send a message to a friend ? ” she asked.

"You might leave a short note. I—I think," he said almost nervously, "I can allow you five minutes—not more—to write it and put a few things together." He wiped his forehead, though the window was open and the room cool. "Of course," he went on quickly, noticing her look of dismay, "you may not be detained long. No doubt your friends will arrange for bail. But now—please—I must ask you to make haste."

"Will you tell me——" she began.

"I can answer no more questions."

Apparently there was nothing for it but to submit. She sat down, scribbled the brief note that we have seen, and rose.

"I am going to my room."

He followed her as far as the outer door, where he mounted guard, as it were.

Within five minutes she rejoined him, dressed for out of doors, a small travelling bag in her hand.

"Let me get it over," she said.

"You are a brave young lady," he remarked.

"Allow me." He relieved her of the bag. "A very brave young lady."

"I've done nothing to make me afraid."

With his fingers on the door handle, he said—

"Will you give me your word to—to come with me quietly?"

Her head went up. "Of course!"

He opened the door and stood aside for her to pass out. Now there was no doubt about his nervousness; he was paler than she.

She went steadily before him down the narrow wooden stairway. On the landing he overtook her, and they continued their descent on the broader stone steps, passing business offices closed for the night.

At the entrance a plain-looking motor brougham was waiting.

"I hope you will remember, Miss Carstairs," he whispered, "that I used no harshness."

"I will — thank you. Have we far to go?"

"It's a longish drive."

As they crossed the pavement Kitty thought it strange that no one stared, then almost laughed at the stupidity of the notion. Why should any one stare? Truly the man was behaving very nicely.

He opened the door, followed her into the brougham, and closed it with a bang. The brougham immediately rolled away. The man took the narrow seat opposite, and she heard him draw a long breath.

She tried to baulk the returning fears. Anger

at her uncle assisted her to some extent. He must have gone quite mad ! And then a dreadful thought struck and almost stunned her spirits. Suppose something had happened to Sam ! Suppose he were—dead ! . . .

Time passed ere she recovered her wits and courage. Her aunt knew the truth, and Kitty could not believe that Rachel Corrie, even for her brother's sake, would fall to perjury. And there was Mr. Risk, and Hilda, and Mr. West, and—Colin ! Oh, with such friends, why should she be afraid ? No doubt she was in for a most disagreeable ordeal ; but it was bound to end in her complete triumph. . . . Well, she was having an adventure, and no mistake ! Adventures !—how lightly she had uttered the word in the past to Colin ! How gently he had treated her foolish talk ! Her mind went back to that night in the little wood at Dunford, when she had let him kiss her. Then his prospects and hers had been simply blank. Now . . . but what had made her allow him to kiss her ?

She came out of a long reflection. Indeed, the destination was evidently a far one ! She had not noticed the course taken by the brougham—not that she could have recognized any streets other than one or two of the main west end

thoroughfares. It seemed to her now that they must be somewhere in the suburbs.

“Are we nearly there?” she asked her guardian.

He cleared his throat. “Still a bit to go,” he said, and gave a long, vague explanation, which she could not follow, as to police districts and other matters. “My work ends,” he concluded, “when I have handed you over to the—the chief inspector.”

She thought of asking him what the chief inspector was like, and whether she would have to go to Scotland, but suddenly she felt too tired to talk. The reaction had come, and she lay back exhaustedly, with the tears not far away. She was no longer in a hurry to reach the destination.

The man drew down the blinds. Soon the speed of the brougham was increased; it seemed to be travelling over a different sort of road. There were occasional ruts that suggested the country.

At the end of what seemed a very long, yet too short period, the man said—

“We are practically there now.” And under his breath he added: “Thank God!”

The brougham lurched round a corner; presently its pace slackened.

The man drew up the blind on the left, and,

the moment the motion ceased, threw open the door and jumped out, laying her bag on the ground.

“Will you get out, please?” he said. His voice had become husky and fearful.

She obeyed and looked about her.

“But surely this is not——”

Speech failed as the man, with a whispered “Forgive,” sprang into the brougham, which immediately started.

“Oh, hell!” groaned the man, “to think I’ve lived to be driven to this for the sake of twenty pounds!”

Kitty found herself standing on the earthen foot-walk of a badly-lighted road, in front of an iron gate, open, with a shrub-bordered path leading to a large, dark house. That was all she had grasped when some one sprang upon her, a heavy shawl was thrown over her head and face, and—her senses failed.

* * * * *

She came to herself, lying on a couch in a large room with a low ceiling which, like the walls, had been whitewashed but lately, for there were dampish patches here and there. The floor was of stone flags, but its bareness was partly covered by Turkey rugs. There were no windows, unless

one cared to give the name to a couple of oblong openings protected by gratings close to the roof. Two electric bulbs, which with their wires, had evidently been hurriedly installed, depended from the ceiling; an electric heater glowed in a niche in one of the walls. Across one of the corners a curtain had been hung on a wire, and being only partially drawn, permitted a glimpse of a small white bed, a white dressing-table and a white wash-stand.

Near the centre of the room was a round table covered with a new cloth and decorated with two pairs of silver flower-vases containing carnations. A middle-aged woman was engaged in putting the finishing touches to a meal consisting of a cold chicken, sliced ham, salad, bread and butter, and so forth, also a small bottle of champagne and a syphon of lemonade.

Kitty sat up, but was still too dazed to notice the incongruities. She saw only a woman's back and the white walls.

"Have they put me in prison?" she asked faintly.

The woman turned a red, expressionless face, and answered—

"Maybe, Miss. But your supper's ready. Kindly ring if you want anything."

"I want to see the—the inspector," said the girl, still groping in a mist.

"Yes, Miss. To-morrow, maybe. Your bed's ready when you want it."

She went out.

Kitty pressed her palms to her temples, and with eyes closed remained motionless for several minutes. Then, with a sigh, she took courage to look about her.

It was well that she had a healthy heart, for at the realization of her surroundings a weakly one must surely have stopped.

CHAPTER XXII

IN the study Colin rose to his feet, a prey to distress and wrath. Kitty's message fluttered in his hand.

"I had better take the midnight train," he said, striving for control.

"To what end?" Risk gently asked, while Hilda, who looked worn-out, took a step forward as if to speak.

"To compel that blackguard Corrie——"

"Please sit down again, Hayward," Risk said, enforcing his words with a mild pressure. "As far as we can see it at the moment, Corrie had no direct hand in the outrage——"

"He has got the Post Office authorities to act——"

"The post office people had nothing to do with it. Pull yourself together, man! I'm going to give you a shock. . . . You tell him, Hilda."

"Mr. Hayward," she said, pityingly, "the person who took Kitty away was merely mas-

querading as a detective. He had nothing to do with the police or the Post Office. My brother learned that much within a few minutes after my giving him the alarm. . . . But don't let this crush you. We want your help, you know." Hilda had a way of striking the right note.

Colin got a grip on himself. "Symington, of course," he said, steadying his voice.

"Oh, of course!" she assented bitterly. "And I went out and left her alone!"

"At the same time," said Risk, "Symington did not move from his hotel after eight o'clock last night, and he went North by the mail train at five this morning. That does not prove his innocence; on the other hand, it does not help to prove the other thing."

"You have set the police to work?" said Colin sharply. At that moment he hated Risk. Why on earth had not the man held up Symington the moment he doubted the latter's right to the Zeniths? Why had he insisted on making a "game" of it all? . . . But the feeling passed. He knew too well that Risk had been as sincerely anxious to shield Kitty from anything sordid and ugly as he had been eager to serve her material interests.

"No," said Risk mildly. "I have no super-

cilious feelings about the methods of our police, but for Miss Carstairs' own sake we want publicity less than ever now. I have eight men at work, who will do all that Scotland Yard could do—and I am not resting much myself.”

Colin thought for a moment. “Knowing what we do,” he said, “we don't need to look far for a motive on Symington's part. The Zeniths alone——”

“Kitty will never give in,” cried Hilda. “He'll never force her to marry him.”

“Good God!” groaned Colin, “to think of her being in that scoundrel's power!”

Risk laid a hand on his shoulder. “Blame me, if you must, Hayward,” he said quietly, “but don't give way to despair.” After a slight pause he added: “Give me four days.”

“You have a clue?”

“Not quite—only the means, I hope, of obtaining one. But don't ask me questions. My plan may be unnecessary after all. We may perhaps find the way without it.”

“But, Mr. Risk, can't you put your plan into operation at once?”

“It requires some developing. . . . For Heaven's sake, Hayward,” exclaimed Risk, with unwonted warmth, “try to believe that I'd give

all I have if I could get the poor girl out of that cad's clutches without an hour's delay ! ”

“ You will trust my brother, won't you ? ” said Hilda softly, and next moment Colin was silently wringing Risk's hand. Somehow, he could not doubt this man.

“ And what can I do ? ” he asked presently.

“ Though it may seem out of place, I want you now to tell me the results of your journey. Also let me have the films you exposed. By the way,” Risk went on, “ West has got a week's leave, and is going to spend a few days in the neighbourhood of Dunford. He's unknown there, and another flying visit from you might seem more than odd to some people—besides, I want you here. Only, I'd like you to see West before he starts by the midnight train—you may be able to give him some hints about the district, and so on. Therefore, we'll get on with our talk, and you can be over at Euston soon after 11.30. He expects you. He would have come here, but he had an appointment with the manager of the Planet Theatre——”

“ You see,” put in Hilda, “ we are so sure of having Kitty with us again, almost immediately, that the play is going forward as if nothing had happened.”

It is to be feared that Colin did not find much comfort in the remark, but at least it reminded him once more that a cool head was then of greater value to Kitty's cause than all the warm hearts in the world.

Though he could not have stated why, he was feeling a little less cheerless when he left Aberdare Mansions for the meeting with West. He was noting in his mind certain suggestions which he thought might be of use to his friend, and absent-mindedly looking out for a taxi-cab, when one appeared and came to the pavement in response to his signal.

"Euston," he said and got in.

But as he was about to draw to the door, a hand was laid on it and a voice requested the driver to "Hold on."

"Excuse me," continued the voice, which belonged to a shabby, genteel, sharp-featured young man, "but I think you are Mr. Colin Hayward." An uncleanly hand presented an envelope.

"What's this?" muttered Colin, then seized it with a start. It was the covering of a note he had sent Kitty a week ago. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Through a barred window," was the answer.

“The lady told me what you were like, and where I’d be likely to find you—this isn’t the first place I’ve tried—and she gave me a sovereign, and she said you would be sure to give me another, sir.” An unclean palm slid forward hopefully.

“But look here,” cried Colin, his heart thumping, “there’s no message written here! Have you lost——”

“The lady said she had nothing to write with, but she said you would surely understand and come quick.”

Colin drew a long breath. “Where is—the barred window?”

“Gimme the sovereign, please, and I’ll show you. It’s not far.”

“I’ll give you five sovereigns when you’ve shown me!” said Colin. “Tell the man where to go and get inside.”

He had not forgotten about West, and Risk was still in his mind, but they suddenly ceased to matter.

“How far?” he inquired, as the cab started.

“About ten minutes from here.”

“What sort of place is it?”

“Respectable—oh, quite respectable, but not the sort of place a gentleman like you would fancy to live in, sir. First time I was ever there,

too. Just taking a stroll, wondering where I was going to get my next meal, when I heard a female cry from an area, and looking down I saw a hand moving at a window, a few inches open, behind bars——”

“That’ll do. Look here, I may require your help.”

“Welcome, sir—when I’ve touched that fiver.”

“Take it now.” A bank-note rustled.

“You’re a real gentleman! Thank ’ee, sir!”

Before long the cab left familiar thoroughfares, and began a journey through a succession of more or less mean streets. In reply to Colin’s questions his companion named some of them, without, however, making Colin much the wiser. But what mattered it whither he was going so long as it was to Kitty? His heart was wild with anticipation; his hand trembled on the crushed envelope that she had so lately touched. He had no fear of not being able to rescue her. If necessary he would request police assistance, but he did not expect to have to go that length. People who abducted girls, or took temporary charge of them, were not the sort to wait for the police. Colin, too, had a fairly heavy stick which Sharp had put into his hand as he left the flat. Certainly he was not afraid. He looked at his watch.

Why, he might not only rescue Kitty, but manage to catch West at Euston also ! As for Symington and Corrie. . . . The shabby-genteel young man began to talk earnestly.

The cab stopped at a corner. The guide got out and walked slowly down a narrow pavement, in front of houses that still wore an air of respectability, dingy indeed, and decaying, but not to be wholly suppressed. The long street was indifferently lighted and void of traffic.

Colin paid the driver and followed. By arrangement he did not overtake his guide, but watched him for a signal.

They were half-way down the street when the leader threw out his left arm. Colin marked the position ; and on reaching it found a gateless space in the railing leading to a steep and narrow flight of steps. He paused for a moment, noted the second low window on his right, which showed a very faint glimmer behind its bars and blind, looked again to make sure that his guide had halted within call, as agreed, and with a wave of his hand, and grasping his stick, began cautiously to descend into the darkness. A moment later he was tapping discreetly on the window, and then——

He was seized from behind, thrown backwards

and downwards, into, as it seemed, an atmosphere of chloroform. The last distinct sounds he heard were the pants of a motor and a strange voice saying, "Hurry up, there's the car."

* * * * *

At five minutes before midnight Anthony West rushed from the train to a telephone box and rang up Risk.

"Colin hasn't turned up," he said, without preamble.

For the first time Miss Risk heard her brother swear. But he did it without losing his calmness.

"Then you must go on, Anthony, and carry out the programme as well as you can," he replied. "You must use your own discretion a little more; that's all. Don't lose your train. Accidents will happen. Good luck to you."

He hung up the receiver, and turned to his sister, his face expressing grave concern.

"Hayward has not arrived at Euston. Of course, he may have met with an accident—but now I could almost bet that Symington did not really go North this morning—or rather, he turned back before he had gone far. I ought to have given the beggar credit for more cunning."

Hilda considered before she asked: "But why

in the world should Symington want to harm him ? ”

“ There may be several reasons. Perhaps I ought to tell you where Hayward disappeared that night you and Miss Carstairs were dining here. He went to Symington’s hotel, and gave the rascal a sound thrashing——”

“ Oh, splendid ! ”

“ Yes, but indiscreet.” He sighed. “ I don’t like it. Cad as he is, I could almost trust Symington not to maltreat the girl, but. . . .” He returned to the telephone and rang up a police station on the route that a cab would naturally take to Euston.

“ But he would never dare,” began Hilda, and stopped short, remembering Symington’s face as she had seen it that night in the train. Cruel—that was the word—the face of a man who would inflict torture to gain his end.

Risk had hit on the truth, Symington had not gone far North that morning. As a matter of fact he had left the train at Rugby, entered a powerful motor-car, and came South again—not to the Kingsway Grand Hotel, but to a rather dilapidated mansion situated at 336 Lester Road, Richmond.

* * * * *

At Dunford on the following evening, John Corrie found among the letters from the South one for himself. For the second time he gazed at a single pencilled word—"Arrested"—and shuddered 'twixt terror and hope. The man's nerves seemed to be in rags, for he paled, started violently, and dropped the letter when the door of the post office opened.

But it was only a tourist who entered. Corrie's whole being bounded up in relief—only to drop sickeningly at the stranger's first words—

"I wish to see Miss Kitty Carstairs."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE woman with the red, expressionless face put her head into Kitty's prison and said—

“ I've to tell ye that he'll be coming to see you in five minutes from now.” Without waiting for a response she closed the door and shot the bolt.

Kitty was seated on the couch with a book in her hand. She had actually managed to read a little, though it is highly probable that she could not have told very clearly what the pages had been about. Yet the fact that she had been able to fix her attention on a mere story for the space of a couple of hours proved that she had regained a fair command over her wits, and recovered at least something of her courage. At all events, of the panic of twenty-four hours ago little trace remained. She was pale, but it was the pallor of anxiety, not terror ; and now, at the woman's announcement, the apprehension in her fine eyes was counterbalanced by a determined firming of her pretty, sensitive mouth.

“He can do nothing, after all,” she assured herself, “and it won’t be very long till they find out where I am. I must show him I’m not afraid of him.”

It was past midnight, but she felt no weariness, for she had slept through the afternoon. She was, in fact, feeling as well as ever she had felt. Just after the first horrid realization of her situation she had made up her mind to starve rather than accept of his hospitality; but soon she had perceived the absurdity of such a course.

“For goodness’ sake, be as sensible as you can,” she commanded herself. “You’ve got to keep fit and healthy, for you don’t know what you may have to do with your strength. And the food is of the best, perfectly cooked and beautifully served. So don’t try to pose as a persecuted heroine on the stage. You’ve been fearfully lucky, and this is only going to be a nasty little episode, which you’ll laugh at before long!”

All the same, she had a breakdown or two in spite of her brave words, and the time had passed very, very slowly. Now as she heard his step at the door, she moved herself to play a part.

Symington entered, closing the door behind him. He was in evening dress and cut a handsome figure in his way. His countenance was somewhat

flushed ; his eyes glistened rather unpleasantly. For various reasons he had delayed visiting his prisoner until now.

“ I am sorry I could not come to see you sooner, Kitty,” he said, halting by the flower-decorated table, and resting his hand on the back of a chair. “ This room,” he went on, “ is not what I would have chosen for your reception, but it was the best I could do in the time. I have a fine house upstairs being prepared for—us. Still, I hope you have been fairly comfortable. You have only to ask for anything you want.” He paused, watching her.

Her eyes had never left the book ; she appeared oblivious of his presence.

“ Kitty,” he said, “ will you kindly tell me if there is anything I can do.”

“ You can go away,” she answered quietly, without moving.

He had prepared himself for an unkind reception. “ There is something you must hear before I go,” he said. “ And, Kitty, don’t trouble to try to make me lose my temper, because I’m not going to oblige you in that way. In any other way, you have only to ask.”

“ Then if you must talk, please leave my name out.”

After a slight pause he said : " Would you mind putting down your book for a few minutes ? "

She lowered it, her finger at the place, and faced him.

" Well ? "

" Have you no question to ask me ? "

" None."

" You are great ! " he exclaimed. " But I have a question to ask."

She lifted her hand to her mouth and gave a little yawn. His colour deepened, but he spoke calmly enough.

" How soon will you marry me, Kitty ? "

There was cruelty in her voice. " Mr. Symington, how far do you intend to go with this idiotic business ? " She threw a significant glance around the room. " It must have cost you a good deal of money so far—and all for nothing ! "

He winced, but kept himself in hand.

" How soon will you marry me ? "

" You know I will never marry you." She made to resume her book.

" I know that you shall ! " He moved quickly and stood over her. " Don't you see that you are in my power ? "

" I'm under lock and key, if that's what you mean."

“Don’t force me to tell you what I mean. I’d far rather have your promise without that. . . . Kitty, listen! You can’t deny that you know I’m desperately fond of you.” His words came swiftly now. “And I can’t deny that I’m aware you don’t even like me. But just as you could make what you please of me, I believe in time, I could——”

“Stop!”

“You must hear me! I’m a rich man, though hardly anybody knows it. I can offer you a splendid life—give you things you’ve never dreamed of, take you abroad, make you a home wherever you desire. . . . Kitty, I confess I’ve done lots to be ashamed of in my time, but I swear I’ll make you a good husband——”

“Oh, do stop!” she said, her calm broken. “How can you—how dare you—talk so after all you have done—the abominable things you have done to me? . . . Rich? What should I care if you had all the money in the world? Why, I shouldn’t care enough to ask how you had got it——”

His hand fell on her shoulder. “Be careful,” he said in tense tones. “For as surely as I am touching you now you are going to marry me!”

She shook off his hand. "If you touch me again——" She stopped short.

"Well?" It was almost a sneer. Next moment he said: "Don't be afraid, Kitty. I'm not that sort. You—you're sacred. . . . But you do not leave this place until we go out of it together to be married. Don't think you can escape, and don't imagine it will be so very long till you give in. Your friends may find their way here some day, but they won't be in time. Afterwards—what will your friends matter? You'll be my wife, and no one shall dare come between us!"

"You are mad!" she exclaimed, clinging to her courage. "For your own sake give up this crazy notion. Otherwise you'll be dreadfully punished!"

With a short laugh he moved away a few paces, then faced her again.

"You deliberately won't understand my love for you, Kitty, and you don't understand my power—as yet. For your own sake, and another's, I beg you once more to give in without forcing me to use——"

"Oh, what is the good of all this talk? You can make things uncomfortable for me for a few days, perhaps, but you can never compel me to

do the most hateful thing I can imagine—in other words, marry you. And that is my last word, Mr. Symington.” She took up her book and opened it, but her fingers trembled on the page.

With difficulty he restrained his passion.

“Very well,” he said a little thickly. “I’m sorry, but you force me on the course I would have avoided if possible.” Softly he cleared his throat. “Now I’ll explain. A little while ago I received a telephone message to the effect that . . . ah!” he exclaimed. An electric bell had sounded in the distance. “Let us wait.” He smiled as he took out his cigarette case, but the fingers that presently held the match were not much steadier than hers. “Listen, listen!” he muttered.

In spite of herself Kitty listened. At first her ears could detect nothing; then they heard the closing of a distant, heavy door. A brief period of silence was followed by the sound, faint to begin with, of slow, heavy footfalls. Soon she realized they were descending a stone stair. Nearer they came, and at last seemed to reach the level. Nearer still—they were coming along the passage outside her door. They rang dully and erratically on the stone flags. Kitty thought of two men bearing a weighty burden.

As they passed the door she heard voices, gruff and impatient.

Suddenly Symington gave an odd, triumphant laugh, saying—

“My second prisoner has arrived!”

Involuntarily the girl lifted her eyes.

“For the last time, Kitty, will you give me your word that you will marry me as soon as I can get——”

She sprang to her feet. “You miserable fool,” she cried, “I’d rather be dead!”

He grinned. “The more you hurt me, the more I love you! It’s no use fighting me, Kitty. I’m going to win,” he declared, “for you’re bound to give in. Why? Because my second prisoner shall not get so much as a crust until you give me your word! Remember, you forced me to it.” He swung round to the door.

“You coward,” she gasped, “who is your second prisoner?”

Without answering he went out. It was as though her wall of defence had suddenly crumbled into ruins.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON the third evening following that of Kitty's disappearance, Risk was reading a letter which the last post had just brought him. The letter was from Anthony West, and the important part of it ran as follows :—

“ I have now completed the arrangements according to your instructions. The town is only twenty miles from Dunford, and the road between is excellent. Besides, the moon will oblige on the night appointed. I am no judge of cars, but think I have engaged the sort you require. . . . I saw the postman yesterday. He is fairly on the mend now, but worrying at not hearing from Miss Kitty. Herewith three snapshots of him, taken while sitting on the hospital veranda. By the way, I gathered that he would not seek to lift a finger against Corrie without Kitty's permission. . . . Corrie is a hard nut. He takes

me for a friend of Kitty's late father, and I have allowed him to think that my first inquiry was prompted more by a belated sense of duty than by any real interest in the girl. I dropped into the post-office about closing time last night, and found him less disinclined to talk. He said nothing directly against his niece, merely remarking that in the face of his advice she had gone to London, where she had friends, and that while she had not yet written, he hoped he might be able to hand me her address before long. To extract truth from such a person will take a bit of doing. The sister, I learn from the gossips, has been ill, though not seriously so, for the last few days. I should add that Corrie goes about saying that the burning of his mill was a piece of foul play. A man told me to-day that it was not insured. . . . No word of Symington. He has not been seen in Dunford for more than a week. As far as I can gather, no one would regret his permanent absence. . . . I see Zeniths have jumped to £8. Do you still say they are worth £12? I almost wish I had taken your advice, and pawned my shirt! . . . Well, I am looking forward to our meeting here on Thursday with pleasure, not to say curiosity. What's the game, I wonder? But, perhaps, you will have found

Kitty and Colin before then—God make it so. . . .”

Risk laid the letter on the table, placed the snapshots in an envelope, directed it, and rang for his man.

“Sharp, take a taxi and deliver this to Mr. Boon. Say I’m sorry it comes a little late, but that he must get his men to work harder. Tell him to spare neither men nor money. There must be no failure to-night. I am going out presently. If I’m late, don’t wait up. Pack my bag for one night; include both my revolvers. Call me at eight; breakfast at nine; and a taxi for nine-thirty.”

An hour later Risk was at the flat in Long Acre.

“This won’t do, Hilda,” he said kindly. “You’re not going to help matters by breaking down. Have you been out to-day?”

“No. I feel now that I daren’t leave the flat in case she should come back—perhaps with that beast after her—poor little soul. Oh, John, I sometimes think it was all my fault. I should not have left her alone that night——”

“Nonsense! If it comes to that, I am to blame, for I might have foreseen. . . . But you’ll soon have her with you again, Hilda!”

“Have you news?” she cried eagerly.

He gave her West’s letter, saying: “You can look at it afterwards. No; I can’t say I have news, but in a few hours I shall be ready to act. That wretched Corrie shall tell me where his niece and Hayward are.”

“Are you sure?” All at once she put her hands on his shoulders, and looked searchingly into his face. “Oh, John,” she whispered, “you can’t hide it—you’re afraid of something!”

“Yes,” he said at last with sudden weariness, “I’m afraid.” Next moment he drew himself up. “But that’s because, like you, I’m tired out. A few hours’ sleep will make all the difference to both of us. Won’t you come back with me and stay the night? I hate leaving you here.”

She shook her head. “I imagine if she came in the middle of the night——”

“Try not to imagine things, my dear. And I’ll just spend the night here. This couch will do. Ask your maid to knock me up at seven. And go straight off to bed yourself. How’s that?”

“Oh, you good brother!” she cried softly. “I was wondering how I was going to get through another night alone!”

Soon she retired, a little more hopeful, and ere long was in a sleep of sheer exhaustion.

But for Risk, wearied as he was, there was scarcely any rest. He was desperately anxious. He could not conceive of Symington daring actually to injure the girl ; but what if the man struck at her through his other victim ? Risk groaned at the thought. He went to the window, and threw it wide to the still, mild night. Ah, it was no longer a game he was engaged in, but a business most terribly serious, vital to the future peace of his soul. For he loved—no need to deny it to the stars—he loved Kitty Carstairs . . . and a lover's insight had informed him that, sooner or later, her heart would turn to Colin Hayward, who had put faith and trust in him, who regarded him as benefactor, aye, and true friend. So he had his honour as well as his love to serve in smashing the enemy. Yet, had Colin not come to London, what might not have happened ? . . .

At last he tore himself from the night and his sorry dreams, and lay down, not to sleep, but grimly to rehearse, in minutest detail, all that he had planned for the morrow. And every now and then he was interrupted by a Dread.

* * * * *

Another was rehearsing a plan that still, mild night. In a small room, furnished with odds and

ends, sat Symington. The atmosphere was unpleasant with cigar reek and whisky fumes. Since his tremendous bout of dissipation the man had somehow failed to regain the mastery in respect of alcohol. Yet he was far from being intoxicated. Apart from the plan itself two things were especially clear to his intelligence. First, Zeniths had boomed to $8\frac{1}{4}$; second, he had less than £20 on hand. It would be necessary to convert another certificate into cash at the earliest moment possible. He was tempted to convert them all into cash at the present magnificent price; only greed to obtain yet more restrained him.

“Nothing for it,” he thought, “but to travel to-morrow night, after. . . Unless—why, the thing might be done to-night! No, no! Steady! Don’t be a fool and spoil everything by rushing it! If her mind is not sufficiently prepared, and if he doesn’t look sufficiently——” Breaking off, he rang the bell at the side of the fireplace.

The woman with the red, expressionless face answered the summons.

“How is the lady now?” he asked curtly.

“Sleeping at last, but she’s restless. I doubt she won’t sleep long.” Her pale eyes avoided his. “Though I don’t know what you may be after, Mr. Granton,” the hard mouth said slowly,

“ I take the liberty of warning you not to carry it too far——”

“ Mind your own business, and clear out. Send your man to me.”

“ No offence intended, but I doubt she hasn’t eaten a bite to-day,” said the woman, and went out. Her humanity was not equal to the grand wages she was getting.

Symington sighed, took a drink and muttered : “ Poor Kitty ! Perhaps we may get it over to-night, after all.”

A huge lout of a man, with a red beard and a bald head, shuffled in.

“ Well, how is he now ? ”

“ Not much change. Looking peaked a bit. But he made a joke when he said good night. Expect he’ll feel a goodish bit worse by to-morrow.”

Symington considered. “ When you go downstairs,” he said at last, “ you will take away the water and give him none to-morrow.”

“ What ? No water, Mr. Granton ? ”

“ That’s what I said.”

“ Oh, but surely that’s a bit——”

“ Are you going to obey or not ? ”

The man lifted his shoulders. “ All right, Mr. Granton, it’s no affair of mine. Only——”

“Get out !”

The man shuffled away. He had an ugly past known to his employer.

Symington cursed under his breath. “No good for to-night. Poor Kitty—it’s a pity, but I can’t help it. Well, to-morrow night ought to settle it, and if not, I can wait. . . . But I might have gone North to-night, lifted the stuff, and got back here under twenty-four hours. Why the blazes didn’t I think of that ?” His eyes roved as if in search of an answer, and lighted on the decanter. He glowered at it, and a flush, almost purple, overran his countenance. “Damn you,” he suddenly shouted, “it was you that kept me !” And, snatching it from the table, he hurled it across the room so that it burst into fragments against the wall. There was a breathless pause till he asked in a frightened whisper, “What the devil made me do that . . . made me do that ?” He went to bed without finishing the drink in the tumbler.

CHAPTER XXV

KITTY was undoubtedly nearing the limit of human endurance. Threats and offers of bribes had alike failed to move the red-faced woman ; not one out of a hundred questions had she answered save by the formula, " I'm sure I couldn't say, Miss," or, " You'll have to ask himself about that."

It was the fourth night of her incarceration, the third since Symington's visit. At first she had demanded his presence ; later she had implored. The reply was always the same : " Maybe soon ; but you must have patience, Miss." Less than an hour ago she had heard it, and now the quaint little clock on the wall, which she had sometimes loved for its " company," and sometimes wanted to smash for its heartlessness, tinkled nine. Was another day going to pass without relief, another night of awful uncertainty approaching ? She had given up trying to persuade

herself that her captor was not vile enough to carry out his menace against Colin—for Colin, she could not doubt, was the second prisoner. Symington, asserted Despair, was surely vile enough for the dirtiest work, since he could so torture the mind of a helpless girl.

And yet Kitty Carstairs was not at the very end of her wits. One thing she had in her power to do. She could starve herself! Yesterday she had scarcely touched food; to-day she had not broken her fast. The tempting meals had gone out of the room as they had been brought in. There on the table, with its mocking carnations, was a silver tray bearing sundry delicacies, exquisitely served, which the woman had left on her last visit for the night. It taxed the girl's powers of resistance, but her spirit conquered her flesh.

"God, hear me," she whispered; "let me not eat till I am convinced that Colin has had food." She was feeling weak and somewhat faint, but the sickly headache had abated, and her mind was very clear.

"I will try once more," she told herself. "I will pretend to be ill, and that may bring him. Then I will show him I am determined to starve. I shouldn't be much use to him dead!"

Her finger was on the bell when she heard a sound in the passage. The bolt was drawn back, and Symington's voice said: "Get to your bed. I don't want to see you again to-night." A rough voice answered: "Right you are, sir. Good night."

Then Symington entered. He had been keeping himself firmly in hand all day; he had an exhausted look, and was rather pale.

Without preface he exclaimed in hurt tones: "Kitty, what's wrong with the food?"

"Is your other prisoner getting the same?" she asked quietly, approaching the table.

His laugh was lost in a crash.

Kitty had lifted the tray and flung it at his feet.

"There's your rubbish!" she panted, catching hold of a chair-back. "You can't beat me!"

"By God!" he exclaimed furious, then restrained himself. "You can't keep it up, Kitty, my dear. One day of real hunger is nothing to brag about. Wait till you see my other prisoner. I'm going to take you there now. He has had three days of it—and no water since yesterday. He'll advise you not to be foolish."

"You beast!"

He winced, but merely said, "Come!"

She did not hesitate even when he took hold of her arm.

“ You are a great fool,” she said. “ Can’t you understand that any decent man would advise me to commit suicide rather than marry you ? ”

“ Be silent ! ” His fingers crushed her flesh.

He led her along a passage lit by electricity. A couple of windows, she noticed, were boarded over with metal-lined wood. They passed a couple of doors similarly strengthened and with stout bolts apparently new. They turned a corner and stopped. The topmost third of the door in front of them had been cut away, and the opening fitted with slim upright steel bars.

“ Look in,” said Symington.

Kitty saw a chamber which might have served as a storeroom in the past. The shelving had been removed ; the walls were torn and filthy. A table, a chair, and an ancient sofa constituted the furnishings. A single light hung from the ceiling.

On the sofa lay a young man, the state of whose raiment suggested a very long journey without a dressing-case. His face was grey and pinched ; his hands made vague, nervous movements.

“ Oh, Colin ! ” she cried.

His eyes opened, peeringly ; he struggled into a sitting posture, and pressed a hand to his brow.

“ Why, it’s Kitty ! ” he said, with a laugh that died abruptly. “ I’d forgotten,” he muttered. A short pause, then—“ So we’re both prisoners. But he won’t starve you, Kitty. Well, I hope our jailer is enjoying himself while it lasts. Oh, you’re there, Symington ! Kitty, has he told you about the thrashing I gave him the other night ? ”

Symington turned away with a badly suppressed snarl.

“ Oh, did you, Colin ? Thank you, thank you ! But, Colin, what am I to do ? He’s starving you, and says he’ll give you nothing till I promise to marry him.”

“ Really ! What a gentleman he is ! Of course you’ll marry him ! ”

“ Come ! ” said Symington roughly.

Kitty held on to the bars. “ Colin, I’m starving myself——”

“ No, no ! For God’s sake, Kitty——” Colin rose, but staggered. “ I’ll pull through. And don’t you be afraid. It’s only for a little longer,” he said, and got to the door. “ Let me touch your hand, Kitty, and I’ll pull through.”

“ Let go ! ” Symington said savagely, “ or——”

“Forgive me, I’ve kissed your hand, Kitty dear,” said Colin in a weak, husky voice.

Beside himself, Symington tore her from the door inside which Colin had fallen. As he left her in her own room he said—

“You’ll feel and think differently to-morrow. I shan’t see you till then. Going now to Dunford. But before I leave I’ll supply our friend with plenty of water—well salted.”

CHAPTER XXVI

THE passage of a motor-car through Dunford in the night-time was too common a happening to disturb sleepers or excite the curiosity of a wakeful person. To-night John Corrie was wakeful, as he so often was till long after midnight, and it is probable that he was not aware of the big car's approach till it stopped at his own door. Being a dealer in motor-spirit, he at once perceived a reason for the stoppage. More than once in the last few years he had been called in similar wise to the receipt of custom, though never quite so late as this. On the last occasion he had, without opening the door, curtly refused supplies. Nowadays, however, he could not afford to turn money away at any hour of the twenty-four. So in shirt, trousers, and slippers he was into the shop almost as soon as the expected knock fell. Still, it was better to make certain before opening.

“What do ye want?” he called, hand on key.

“Petrol.”

He opened . . . and next moment his arms were behind him while steel clicked on his wrists.

“A single sound by way of alarm, John Corrie,” said a quiet, cold voice, “and you’re a ruined man. We are not after your money, but we’re going to have the whole precious truth out of you.”

The speaker, as the half-fainting Corrie perceived in the light of a portable lamp, which some one had placed on the counter, was accompanied by three men, two of them in the garb of mechanics. The third he recognized as the person recently inquiring about Kitty.

“What do ye want wi’ me?” he whimpered.

“Where is your sister?” asked Risk.

“In her bed. She’s ill.”

“Then we shall do nothing to disturb her, and you had better follow our example. West, find a chair, and put him on it—over at the door.” He indicated the exit to the dwelling-house.

Near the opposite end of the shop, which was fairly spacious, the mechanics were already busy. On rubber-shod feet they made scarce a sound. Within the space of a few minutes they had rigged up a framework, about nine feet square, and stretched a white screen upon it. Risk unpacked

the contents of a box of polished wood, while West kept guard on the prisoner.

At last, with a show of courage, Corrie demanded: "What daft-like performance is this? A magic lantern——"

Risk came quickly behind him. "We're going to show you a few pictures, Corrie," he said pleasantly, "and afterwards we shall be glad to hear how they strike you. Meantime I'm going to gag you—keep still, it won't hurt."

At the end of ten minutes one of the men murmured, "All ready, sir," to which Risk replied, "Wait till I give the word," and stationed himself where he could watch every movement on Corrie's part. The lamp was put out, but through the blinded windows a little moonlight filtered, giving a ghostly touch to the man in the chair.

"Number one," said Risk softly.

The screen was illuminated. Upon it appeared a face, that of the late Hugh Carstairs. A glimpse and it was gone. Corrie gave a jerk.

"Two," muttered Risk, and Kitty Carstairs smiled and disappeared.

"Three." A man's visage with an uncertain grin—Symington.

Then, for an instant, the screen held a certificate for 500 shares in the Zenith Gold Mines. Corrie

sat as if frozen, but at the next he quivered, for he beheld a portion of a letter which he knew was in his safe.

"Six." Behold! Sam, the postman, holding a copy of the *Western Weekly* in one hand and staring at a letter in the other. Again Corrie gave a jerk.

"Seven." A five-pound note of the National Bank of Scotland.

"Eight." A rear view of Corrie's cottage, a ladder against the ivy, and a man of Corrie's build reaching into an open window. And then there was a pause.

"Now," said Risk, "we are going to have a little cinema entertainment, a scene from a drama of real life which I believe would interest the public, not to mention the police."

As he spoke the door from the dwelling-house was opened a few inches, silently, unobserved.

"Go ahead," said Risk.

What followed was, as the perpetrator would have been first to admit, a piece of barefaced "fake." Yet its one glaring divergence from fact and its several minor discrepancies could not neutralize the main dire truth of the story. As a film it had been a costly and difficult piece of work; as a spectacle it would have impressed

any audience. The only question Risk asked himself now was: Would it attain the single object to which it had been devoted?

The screen was again illuminated, but not brightly. Corrie, sweating with apprehension, gazed in a sort of fascination at the outside of his own home. Soon he saw a muffled figure which he could scarce have denied as his own, so familiar it was, even to the slight limp of the left leg, emerge and steal down the lonely road, with fugitive glances here and there. It vanished and immediately there appeared a shanty that might have been the postman's. Towards it came the muffled figure. It passed behind the shanty. A strangled sound came from Corrie's throat as he tried to scream, "I didna!" The familiar figure came back, went to the door and . . . Corrie shut his eyes. But he could not keep them so. When he looked again the shanty was blazing at the rear. Suddenly, the door was torn inwards and Sam, the postman, or his double, dropped a hatchet and staggered forth in agony. He reeled across the road, fell on the grass and lay heaving. Then into the picture crept the muffled figure, raised a bludgeon and smote once, twice; knelt, lingered, and rose with a letter in its hand. Then all movement ceased for, perhaps, ten seconds,

And then, as by an invisible hand, the black muffler was snatched away, and there was the face of John Corrie, and no other, a mask of guilty terror.

The prisoner, breaking from West's detaining hold, pitched forward to the floor, and grovelled.

"What are ye doing to my brother?" The harsh voice of a woman startled them all.

Gaunt, ghostly, Rachel Corrie strode forward and halted beside the miserable creature whom she loved.

"Pack o' lies!" she cried. "It was me that set fire to the house; it was me that stole the Zeniths, and sold them to Symington; but I've got them back, all but one certificate. Ye cowards! what mean ye by treating an old man——" She broke off, fell on her knees and whispered: "John, it's all right. Ye're safe, dearie, quite safe."

Risk, who had sent the wondering mechanics outside, turned the key and came over to the group. He stooped and unlocked the handcuffs, unfastened the gag.

"Miss Corrie," he said gently, "I'm sorry you have suffered this, but it was vital that we should get at the truth." He signed to West, and

between them they lifted Corrie to the chair. He was not unconscious, but stupefied.

The woman got to her feet and began to chafe her brother's hands.

"Listen," she said in a low voice, "promise—swear—that he'll never be troubled again, and I'll put in your hands the nine certificates——"

"I'm afraid we want even more than that, Miss Corrie," said Risk.

"What do ye want? Money for the other? Well——"

"A full account of your brother's bargains with Symington."

"I can give ye that, too—if ye promise."

"And we must know at once where your niece is—where Symington has hidden her."

"God!" Rachel's jaw dropped. "Hidden her?" she gasped after a moment. Suddenly she shook her brother, not harshly. "John, what's this they're saying? Kitty hid away by Symington! Speak, man!—oh, but surely ye ken nothing about such a black business! . . . Yet speak, John! Where's Kitty?"

"To save yourself from penal servitude, Corrie," said Risk solemnly, "tell me where she is."

Corrie groaned and hopelessly answered—

"Before God, I dinna ken."

Risk and West looked at each other. For once, at least, the man had told the truth. They could not doubt it. And so the great effort had ended in failure.

There was a grievous silence. At last West spoke.

“I suppose, Miss Corrie, you never heard of Symington having another address than White Farm—of late, I mean.”

Rachel started. “Wait!” she exclaimed. “Can I trust ye no to hurt him?”

They assured her, and she ran unsteadily into the dwelling-house. During her absence Corrie made one remark. It was characteristic.

“The mill was na insured. I’m completely ruined.”

Rachel returned. “See!” She handed him the folded paper she had inadvertently taken from Symington’s strong box. “And take the Zeniths,” she added. “Oh, the curse they’ve brought to this house.”

At the lamp Risk examined the document. Drawing a quick breath, he said: “Miss Corrie, this is our last hope; we must act on it without delay. As for the shares, you will kindly keep them till I send you a certificate to take the place of the missing one, and then you and your brother

can deliver the lot, in whatever way you choose, to Miss Carstairs."

"Ye would trust us!" gasped the woman.

Risk just glanced at the abject Corrie. "I believe it is what Miss Carstairs would do herself," he said, and added, with a faint smile: "I've got a good sister, too. Well, you shan't be further disturbed. Those things"—he indicated the screen and apparatus—"can be put aside, and I'll have them taken away later on. Come, West. There's not a moment to lose."

They entered the car and, twenty minutes later, the special train waiting for them at Kenny Junction. And as they were whirled South, somewhere in Yorkshire, a great train roared past bearing the sleeping Symington to the rudest awakening of his life. He had laid himself down in his berth, still savage with chagrin at his blunder in bringing his two prisoners face to face before they were sufficiently subdued, yet confident as ever of ultimate victory. Poor little Kitty! Plucky though she was, she was bound to give in once hunger and distress got the upper hand.

Symington, however, had made a second blunder, though he remained ignorant of it. He had left Kitty with a new horror to brood on and had thereby rendered her so much more desperate

and helpless ; but he had left her, also, a straw, so to speak, on the flood of her despair. Her intelligence did not perceive it at once ; hours had passed and her spirit was wellnigh exhausted when it drifted into her ken. She clutched it because there was nothing else to lay hold on. Would it serve at all ? Was the situation altered by the fact that her persecutor was going away—nay, he must have gone three hours ago !—for the night ?

Suddenly she sprang from the couch. Danger ? What danger would she not dare in order to help—to save—Colin ? Her mind was still very clear. She thought quickly. Then acted.

She switched off the lights, groped her way behind the curtain to the bed, and lay down. On the wall, convenient to her hand, was a bell-button. She gave it a long pressure, then waited—in vain. Again she rang ; again and yet again. At the end of ten minutes she began to fear for her scheme, but just then she heard shuffling steps in the passage. The bolt was drawn, the door opened, and a voice demanded crossly to know what she wanted at two in the morning.

Kitty groaned and cried : “ Oh, I can’t bear it any longer. Please bring some food—bread, water—anything. I’m too weak to get up.”

"All right," was the sulky reply, "but you might have taken it when it was there for you."

At the re-bolting of the door Kitty got up. Presently she was leaning against the wall just behind the door. She trembled all over; her heart thumped; she feared she was going to faint. Would the woman never return?

At last she came, threw open the door, and still drowsy and grumbling, proceeded with an untidy tray in the direction of the bed. She was at the curtain when Kitty darted from her corner and out into the passage. Bang went the door, home went the trusty bolt!

A single light glowed in the passage. Without pause Kitty ran next door, shot the bolt, to the next again, and treated it likewise. From within a man's voice called sleepily: "What's up?" Then she had to take the support of the wall, her hand to her heart—but not for long. The trapped woman began a noisy protest. Kitty went back and said as firmly as she could—

"If you make another sound, I swear you'll get no mercy later. The man's bolted in too."

"You can't get out of the basement," bawled the prisoner. "The stair-door's locked, and he took the key with him."

"Very well. Our friends will be here in the

morning," Kitty retorted brazenly, "and I don't think you'll ever see your master again, unless in the police court."

The woman began to whine.

"Hold your tongue," said Kitty, and left her.

She ran to the place where she had seen Colin. Through the bars she beheld him huddled on the sofa. A large earthenware jug lay smashed in a pool on the floor.

With her heart overflowing, her eyes half blind with tears, she tore back the bolt. He did not move at her entrance, not even when she fell on her knees beside him.

"Oh, Colin, Colin !

His hands fell from his white, pinched face and tired eyes. He regarded her in a vague fashion.

"Kitty," he said dreamily, "by any beautiful chance, did you mean what you said about your lips ? "

And then it seemed the most natural thing in the world that they should be in each other's arms.

* * * * *

"There must be a kitchen and larder somewhere. Are you able to come and look, Colin ? "

They were both pretty shaky, but they went exploring along that stone passage like lovers in a sequestered country lane.

They discovered a comfortable kitchen, with two basket easy chairs, and a well-stocked larder.

"We must eat awfully little to begin with," said the wise Kitty. "And you must sit in that nice chair till I prepare it."

They partook cautiously of some very light dainties, and sipped a little wine and water; and then Colin felt equal to a wash-up; and then they made love; and then Colin went along to give the man, who was inclined to be boisterous, a word of warning; and then they made more love, and talked a little sense as well; but the sense made them very sleepy and for a space they forgot even each other; and when Colin woke up he beheld Kitty preparing something for breakfast; and it was such a delicious sight to behold her with her sleeves rolled up that he was almost angry when Risk and West, having forced a silent entrance to the house, smashed their way down to the basement.

* * * * *

Later, safely at Hilda's flat, Kitty would have thanked Risk, but he stopped her almost at the first word.

"No, Miss Carstairs," he said, with a rueful smile, "I have found out that I'm not clever. I thought I was till I met your aunt. I have to

thank her for saving me from a bitter failure. I believe she will yet save her unhappy brother. And," he paused for a moment, "I think we may leave Mr. Symington to receive his punishment from her—unless you would prefer——"

"Oh, let him go," she cried with a shudder. "I hope I may never see him, or Dunford, again. . . . I want to ask you a question, Mr. Risk. Do I—do I owe you a hundred pounds?"

"Alas, no," he answered meaningly; "I'm not the lucky man."

"Ah!" said Hilda, "I was sure of it all the time!"

"Colin!" exclaimed Kitty before she could prevent it, and blushed adorably.

Colin turned inquiringly from his talk with West. "Yes, dearest," he said quite naturally, and then blushed also.

There was an interesting silence till the young man stammered: "By the way, hasn't Kitty told you we were engaged?"

"Well," remarked Hilda, when the congratulations were over, "I must say I never thought of Mr. Symington as a match-maker!"

CHAPTER XXVII

IT would seem that Rachel Corrie had forgotten her own weakness in her brother's collapse. He had risen as usual, but it was evident that he was totally unfit for the business of the day. Crouched in his chair by the kitchen fire he presented a sad spectacle of human misery and shame. It was after nine, and Rachel was endeavouring to persuade him to eat some breakfast.

With scarcely any warning Symington, coming from the shop, was upon them. His face was like chalk, his eyes were congested.

"Corrie," he cried hoarsely, "I give you three minutes to produce my Zenith certificates!"

Corrie seemed to shrink—that was all.

Rachel placed herself in front of him.

"Mr. Symington," she said steadily, "I took them, and ye can just make up your mind never to see them again."

Just for an instant he seemed baulked. Then

he said viciously: "Hand them over, or see your brother go to jail!"

"For what? 'Twas me that fired the postman's house, but that's all settled. Anything else?"

He glared at her, uncertain how to proceed.

She did not wait for him. "Mr. Symington, two gentlemen were here last night, and I sent them to a house at Richmond, Surrey——"

"What?" . . . Devil, you've ruined me!" He fairly staggered. He did not ask how she had learned about the house.

"They'll be there by now, I should say," she went on unemotionally. "A dirty business, Mr. Symington. If I were you, I would make haste to quit this country. You're a done man."

"Corrie," he shouted, "you're responsible! You sold me the shares. Find me the certificates at once, or by——"

"Dinna tell all the neighbours about it," Rachel said quietly. "I'm responsible. Do what ye like wi' me. But mind ye broke your part o' the bargain by selling some o' the shares secretly——"

"You fool, that was no legal bargain! But the law will recognize your brother's receipt for——"

“Gang to the law! . . . Man, I can fancy ye sweating at the sight o’ a policeman!”

He looked death at her then, yet he must still use guile rather than force. Suddenly he spoke.

“Look here! I’ll make terms with you. I’ll give you a—a third.”

“I’ll keep what I’ve got—for Kitty. So that’s the end, and ye can just get out o’ this and leave me to give John his breakfast.”

With a snarl he sprang, thrust her aside, and reached the side of Corrie’s armchair; Corrie leapt, sank back and became rigid, the muzzle of a revolver against his temple.

“Get me the Zeniths!”

Rachel’s countenance was grey. At last she wet her lips, and said almost inaudibly—

“I’ll fetch them.” She turned to go.

“No,” whispered the voice of John Corrie. “Let him shoot. Ye’ll keep your honour, and he’ll be a murderer. I’m no caring.”

In the silence steps were heard approaching. The voice of a girl called: “Is Mr. Symington there? A wire has come for him.”

Symington went to the door and took the orange envelope. Then closing the door and putting his back to it—the revolver still in his hand—he opened the message. As he read he

seemed to forget the presence of others. His face took on a bleak, sickly aspect.

This was the message—

“ At Anchor Line Office, Glasgow, fifty pounds and ticket await Mr. Granton. One hour after dispatch of this, instructions will be sent local police. Bearer Zeniths are now subject to scrutiny at Company's London office before they can be negotiated. John Risk, Director.”

He read it thrice, and during the third reading he slipped, as if unconsciously, the revolver into his pocket. For a brief space he stood motionless, bowed as if in thought.

All at once he turned, opened the door, threw up his head, squared his shoulders, and went out.

Dunford saw him no more.

John Corrie still carries on business there. His sister's money, which turned out to be twice as much as he thought, saved the situation. The only noticeable change in the man is his open respect for her. She writes to Kitty a stiff letter twice a year.

Sam, the postman, refused a new house, but accepted from Risk a “ soft job ” in London.

* * * * *

On a night, six months after Symington's disappearance, our five friends occupied a box at the Planet. The occasion was the 150th performance of the play, which was going as strong as ever. Anthony West had ceased to grumble at having to accept a fat cheque every Wednesday. Kitty did not know what to do with all her money, but, as Risk assured her, she had still time to think about it. Her marriage day was fixed for a month thence.

The curtain fell on the last act.

"Don't wait for me," said Risk. "I'm going down in a minute to have a word with Craven. I may look you up later, Hilda," he added with a more than usual affectionate glance at his sister.

That afternoon West had called upon him, and made a confession concerning Hilda.

With leisurely haste the four lovers left the box. None of them had protested at the idea of not waiting for Risk.

He gazed after them, smiling whimsically, possibly a little sadly.

"And so," he murmured, "the poor dog got none."

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